

**ACROSS:** Map of the Kingdom of Siam and its Neighboring Countries, R. Placide Augustin Dechaussé, 1686

# CRACKING THE COCONUT

THE LEGEND OF MARIE GUIMARD

BY RACHEL KWOK

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o anyone familiar with the annals of Thai desserts, there is no one quite so celebrated as Marie Guimard, known better by the Thai people as Thao Thong Kip Ma. Born in Ayudhya, the old capital of Thailand, in 1664, Guimard came from a Japanese family of hidden Christians who fled Japan to escape religious persecution. The family first settled in Cuchin (Vietnam) in 1614 and eventually traveled to Siam (Thailand), where Guimard's Portuguese-Japanese mother, Ursula Yamada, married a half-Bengali, half-Japanese pastor who was often referred to as Master Phanick. In her youth Guimard was taught to cook the food of her Portuguese and Japanese ancestors by her mother and grandmother, a skill that would later aide her in growing her connections in the Siamese court.

At age 18 Marie Guimard married the Greek adventurer Constance Phaulkon and the two quickly became one of the most powerful foreign couples in the Kingdom. Phaulkon's

linguistic abilities eventually led him to become Foreign Minister in 1683 while Guimard gradually built up a friendship with the Princess Queen, King Narai's only daughter, becoming the only foreigner allowed to visit the royals' inner sanctum. Key to this courtly success were Guimard's abilities in the kitchen. In 1685 she famously served a visiting French delegation her version of Portuguese-Japanese sponge cakes known as *kasutera*. A popular confectionery with origins in Nagasaki, Guimard's recipe replaced the more traditional wheat flour with local Thai rice flour, and created what is today still called *khanom foo*.

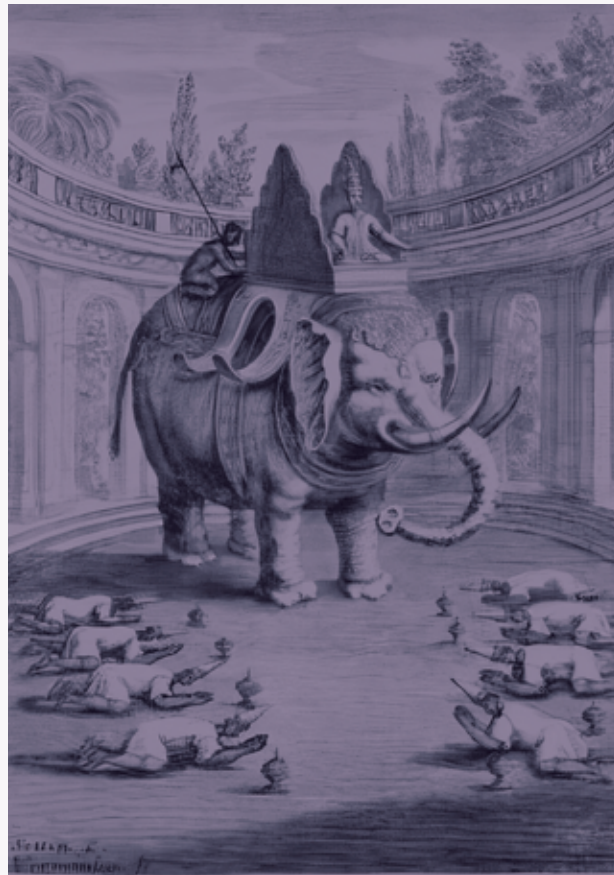
When King Narai fell ill in 1688, a rumor spread that Phaulkon planned to use Narai's designated heir, Phra Pui, as a puppet to rule the kingdom. The King's foster brother, Phra Phetracha, seized on this as an excuse to stage a *coup d'état*, now known as the 1688 Siamese Revolution, and usurped power by executing the royals who were next in line for the throne. Seen as being too influential and having too many foreign ties, Guimard's Greek husband



"The King Observing the Moon"  
from *A Voyage to Siam*,  
Guy Tachard, 1686

seeds. The arrival of foreigners in Siam in the 17th century began to change Thai desserts. Europeans, most notably the Portuguese, brought with them not only new ingredients such as the chili pepper but also novel cooking techniques, particularly in baking. Over time Thais embraced these foreign introductions and gradually incorporated them into their own local cooking.

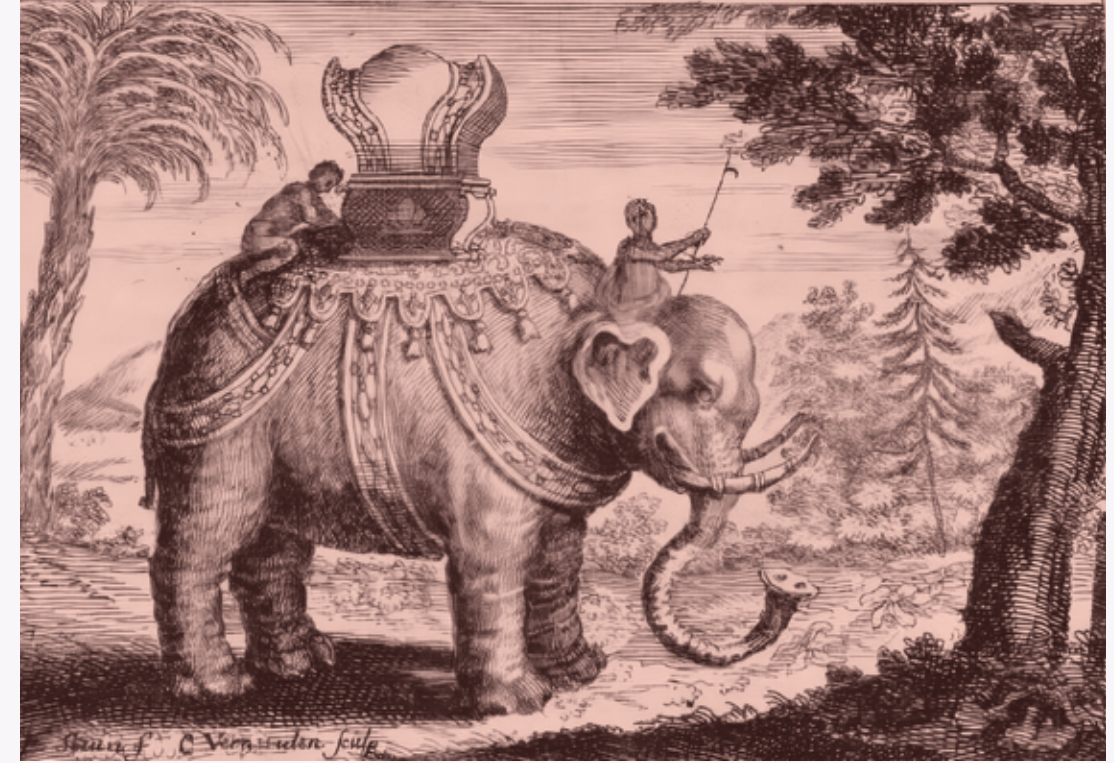
In the middle of this culinary melding was Marie Guimard and central to her fusion cuisine



"The King Upon His Elephant,"  
Guy Tachard, 1686

was soon executed and in turn, Marie herself was thrown in jail. After a brief escape cut short by a betrayal by the French navy, with whom she sought safety, Marie was condemned to a lifetime of slavery in the royal kitchen. It was within these confines that Guimard is credited as having revolutionized the art of making Thai sweets.

Centuries before the first Thai kingdom of Sukhothai (1238-1438) and well before Marie Guimard found herself enslaved, desserts from this region of Southeast Asia were considered sacred. Consisting of staples such as glutinous rice dough and grated coconut, intricate sweets would most often be presented as offerings to the Rice Goddess during rice planting and harvest. The only humans allowed to consume such desserts were those considered divine themselves, such as monks and royalty, so everyday local treats were much more simplistic, typically freshly cooked sticky rice with a touch of palm sugar, grated coconut and roasted sesame



"The Princess Queen's Elephant,"  
Guy Tachard, 1686

was the coconut. In the royal kitchen coconut cream came to replace dairy in the growing number of foreign dessert recipes the court enjoyed. Through Marie Portuguese *pudim fla* became the Thai *flan sangkhya*, a coconut custard steamed in a hollowed-out pumpkin, and coconut cream and palm sugar created *khanom mo kaeng*, a caramel custard named for the earthenware pots it is baked in.

Amongst Guimard's other most important innovations was the addition of eggs into Thai desserts, which elevated the combination of coconut, rice, and sugar to new heights. Most celebrated of these desserts is *thong ek*, or "first gold" in Thai. In Guimard's Ayudhya kitchen

coconut cream was simmered with sugar until smooth. With the addition of egg yolks and sifted rice flour, the ingredients were transformed into a silken, golden liquid. When the air was heavy with a sweet scent, the golden batter went into a mold and emerged like an elegantly shaped jasmine flower. Intended to be served on auspicious days such as religious ceremonies and wedding engagements, *thong ek* are still crafted and eaten to this day.

Guimard's sweet innovations were a sensation not only among the kingdom's elite but also with her apprentices and assistants, who eventually numbered some two thousand working in the royal kitchen. Although it was still taboo for com-



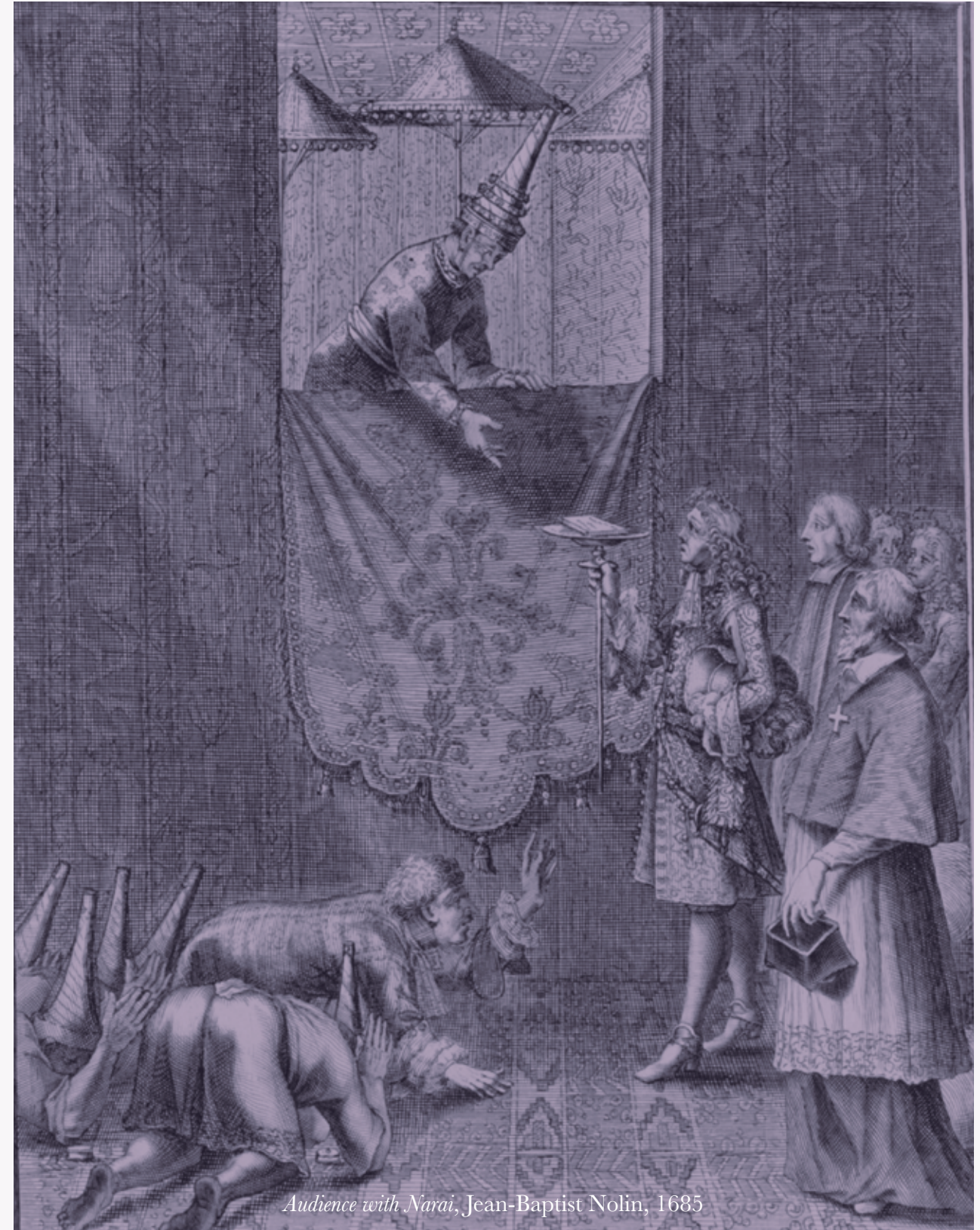
"A Royal Sailing Vessel,"  
Guy Tachard, 1686

As for Guimard, her own fate was far more bittersweet. Eventually becoming head of the royal kitchen, her enslavement lasted through four reigns—Narai (1656-1688), Phetracha (1688-1703), Suriyenthathibodi (1703-1709), and Thai Sa (1709-1733)—until the talented chef finally passed away in 1728. In spite of her own tragic story and the skeptics who believe it was the Portuguese as a whole who altered Thai sweets, Guimard's golden treats are now recognized as Thai national treasures. To this day there are still traditional sweet makers in Thailand who continue to make Guimard's desserts with recipes that they have inherited from their forebears. By cracking the coconut and beating egg yolks into Thai desserts, Guimard's decadent inventions not only brim with luscious lipids, but taste of the sweetness and pain of centuries before. ■

moners to eat such decadent desserts, these cooks nonetheless started replicating these recipes at home and, over time, they began to appear as offerings for special ceremonies and then as gifts for guests and family members. By the end of the eighteenth century the trade and commerce of Siam flourished and its income rose. The refined sugar industry grew too, and higher income and lower sugar prices meant that Thai sweets became ever more affordable as an everyday indulgence.

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*Audience with Narai*, Jean-Baptist Nolin, 1685