



From top: Chopping away; aromatic olives ready to go; hands-on lessons from the pros; Courageous Kitchen olives for Bt300.



## JUST A DASH OF COURAGE

Something's cooking in the Thai capital, where a chef-led project is combining good food with a good cause. **By Diana Hubbell**

"It's easy to start a conversation with food," says Dwight Turner, founder of **In Search of Sanuk** ([insearchofsanuk.com](http://insearchofsanuk.com)), a Bangkok-based organization that aims to provide sustenance, housing and education to some of the city's least privileged. "It's a lot harder to open with 'Some of these kids survived war.'"

Judging from the curious faces, you'd never guess that these 20 or so young teens have already endured more hardship in their short lives than most people ever experience. Their backgrounds are varied, their stories long. Most of their parents are urban refugees who eke out a meager living as migrant workers in the outmost margins of Thai society.

Today, though, this gaggle of adolescents has VIP access to the sun-splashed open kitchen of **Opposite Mess Hall** ([oppositebangkok.com](http://oppositebangkok.com); dinner for two Bt800), one of Bangkok's favorite tables, and the undivided attention of Jess Barnes, its tattoo-covered chef. Before them in a meticulous assembly line sit gourmet olives, rosemary, mountains of garlic and chilies, and mason jars for canning. For a couple hours, they work, giggle, snack and have the rare luxury of a little *sanuk*—fun.

In the process, they're getting Bangkok talking about a difficult topic. Cooking and nutrition lessons with Turner and Thai-Laotian American teacher Christy Innouvong are a weekly affair, while these particular chef-led canning sessions occur about once a month. The jars of

aromatic olives they produce under the label **Courageous Kitchen** pop up at monthly food markets such as **Urban Eatery** ([kvillagebangkok.com](http://kvillagebangkok.com)) and **Spring Epicurean Market** ([facebook.com/springepicureanmarket](http://facebook.com/springepicureanmarket)) both to spread awareness and to raise funds to purchase fruit, vegetables and rice: staples their parents might otherwise end up scavenging.

"We want to give the kids some sense of business skills. They get to sell these at the market and are paid for their time," says Turner. "All the money goes directly back to the community. They see the difference they can make. We're fulfilling an immediate need, but also a psychological one."

For now, the operation is still in its infancy, but Barnes and Turner have big plans. They're on their way to having a dedicated kitchen space by autumn and selling their products in cafés throughout Bangkok.

"We're starting simple, just treading water right now," Barnes acknowledges. "We want the infrastructure set up so visiting chefs have an easy way to contribute their time."

It may be small in scope, but the effects of the project are already evident. Bashu, a cheeky 14-year-old who admits—in excellent English—that he'd rather have "a nice juicy steak" than some of the veg-heavy meals, has already brought some of his newfound skills home.

"I'm happy to come here. When I make something for my parents, they like it and I know that it is healthier for them." +