



Thai Food: A Gateway to Cultural Understanding

Ratiwan Watanasin¹

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to deliver a key part of findings of the author's doctoral thesis in order to support a concrete relationship between food and cross-cultural understanding. Food choice is a multidimensional consumer decision making activity. Typically, consumers perceive their native food more favourably; thereby, adoption of ethnic foods is primarily correlated with their openness to new cultures. Seeking symbolic meanings for Thai food products within multicultural American consumers, a qualitative research reported in the thesis was conducted across eight sets of respondents, who resided in Thailand and five states in the United States. The findings reveal that Caucasian Americans have a strong food culture and are diverse consumers. As Thai food can be incorporated with any ethnic foods, it is a unique and valuable cuisine. It is well-accepted among consumers, restaurateurs, marketers, and mass media. Importantly, cultural appreciation is required for a high degree of food acculturation and marketing.

Keywords: Thai/ethnic food, acculturation, cultural appreciation, food marketing

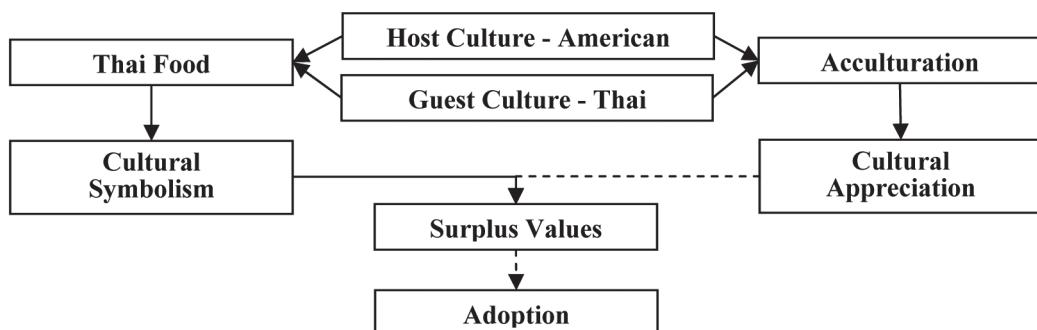
¹ Faculty of Management Science, Suan Dusit University



Introduction

Food has become a regular topic in academia, public policy, and mass media. In big cities, consumers have easy access to gourmet and exotic foods, ethnic cookbooks, high-end cookware, cooking shows, eating and cooking contests, culinary tours, and even food exhibits in museums (Lockwood, Long, 2009: 92). Food choice is a multidimensional consumer decision making activity. Typically, consumers perceive their native food more favourably; thereby, adoption of ethnic foods is primarily correlated with their openness to new cultures (Verbeke, Lopez, 2005: 823), as well as opportunities to exchange cultures (Bryant et al., 2003). In the United States, food products intensely compete with functional elements, such as nutrition factors, flavour, and presentation. The level of Thai food adoption thus depends upon how Americans perceive Thai culture and Thai food products, especially when comparing with their set of values and norms. As portrayed in Figure 1, if cultural symbolism and appreciation are in alignment during the acculturation process, symbolic meaning will add surplus values to increase satisfaction and motivate Americans to adopt new cultures or unfamiliar products. Undeniably, American culture, as the host culture, often overpowers the guest cultures, like Thai culture, as the number of Thai immigrants and the proportion of Thai food consumption among Americans are negligible.

Figure 1 Cultural symbolism, acculturation, appreciation, and adoption of Thai food products





Food culture

Food literature largely agrees that humans do not eat just to fill their stomachs (Gabaccia, 1998; Harris et al., 2005). The virtue of food is far beyond a source of nutrition and sensory preference, it involves personal and social value creation (Mintz, Du Bois, 2002: 22-33), such as lifestyles, relationships, and rituals, as well as celebrations, and personal, ethnic, regional, and national identities (Lind, Barham, 2004: 47-60). In that way, it is a basis of civilisation, and contains profound, multidimensional meanings (Bentley, 2001: 179-183). Food symbolises a power to influence lives through its meanings (Bryant et al., 2003), for example, family memory or foreign adventure, reward or punishment, preference or repulsion, and so on. As functional and symbolic good (Korthals, 2002: 313), food can provide functional benefits (nutrients), emotional pleasures (challenges in trying ethnic foods), socially-desirable activities (trendy cuisines), and self-expression (fancy restaurants), as well as political statement (identity) (Lefferts, 2005: 247-258). It determines how you look or what you feel (Harris et al., 2005). The acquisition, consumption, disposal, and thought, as well as feeling related to the food, define the self-identity or who you are (Gabaccia, 1998).

There are two fundamental elements of food culture: (1) humans eat what they can find from their environment; and (2) they eat what their ancestors ate (Pillsbury, 1998). Besides those elements, what they eat is determined by preference. In addition, when they are older, they interact with other cultures and acquire new tastes. Their daily choices vary widely. Though the concept of a proper meal is culturally different, its symbolic meaning is equally valued (Holm, 2003: 531). That is, a good meal is marked as a happy and healthy meal.

The meaning of a food varies with the contexts in which the experiences occur. Whenever consumers hear a food name, their memories recall a meaningful past (e.g. images, thoughts, feelings), and then they process a meaning for such food. The meaning represents attitudes towards the food, as well as the self, sensory experience, and contexts when and with whom the associated experiences occur (Lyman, 1989). To understand the true meaning of a particular food requires historical exploration of the persons and their culture (Lind, Barham, 2004: 47-60). Symbolic consumption gains interest among marketers since it can enhance consumers' self-concept, personality, and social development (Khalil, 2000: 53); in so doing, it encourages affective consumers to buy.



American food culture and acculturation

The conventional “melting pot”, whereby diverse ethnic groups constantly influence American culture, and the long-term evolution process erodes ethnic distinctiveness, is no longer valid (Ueltschy, Krampf, 2001: 14-31). Today, the American cultural complexity has to be explained by the Anglo conformity, the melting pot, and the cultural pluralism (Alba, Nee, 1997: 826). Now, “salad bowl” is a more preferable term to explain the diversity of American cultures (Gabaccia, 1998). That is, immigrants can decide if they want to assimilate into the Anglo-American culture, fuse with to create a hybrid cultural mix, or maintain their cultural distinctions, which represent cultural plurality. Apparently, ethnicity in America is no longer something to hide or be forced to assimilate (Harris et al., 2005).

Ethnic food, or non-American food, is an influential, social communicator, which conveys ethnic values in terms of tradition and history (Inness, 2001). Immigrants do not necessarily bring the actual food, recipes, and utensils to America; yet, they live with the memories of their old-country foods and the foodways which they preserve within their family, and later introduce to others through events, celebrations, or commercialisation (Rahn, 2006: 30-46). For Americans, ethnic foods mean those that come from so-called “foreign” cultures, not the ones that already assimilated to American food culture, such as British fish and chips or spaghetti and meatballs (Inness, 2001). Since cultural values (e.g., symbolic meaning of food, preferences in tastes) are not entirely comparable and translatable (de Mooij, 2005), local and ethnic foods are unequally appreciated (Mintz, 2002: 24-32). Normally, consumers are more attached to their native food. Yet, values are changeable, as proven by German and Italian foods which were once more foreign to Americans. Particularly now that German and Italian descendants have become parts of the host American culture (Inness, 2001).

Even with the fear of cultural differences, Americans often suspend ethnic prejudices and open up to cross-cultural culinary exchanges. As such, food acculturation has occurred peacefully in America because it involves pleasure in seeking new tastes and experiencing different cultures, as well as economic exchanges (Barbas, 2003: 669; Gabaccia, 1998). Moreover, dining places only propose slight threats during ethnic socialisation. For Americans, ethnic food reflects not only a desire to differentiate pleasure, but a symbolism of connection with their own diverse culture (Lu, Fine,



1995: 535-553). Even so, the popularity of ethnic foods has done so little in fostering ethnic understanding. They only inspire few Americans to learn more about ethnic cultures (Barbas, 2003: 669).

According to Barbas , restaurants are the starting points of mass acculturation among host consumers. The popularity of pasta, bagels, or fajitas was sparked by the availability in numerous restaurants. Yet, the real acculturation begins only if the dishes are served at home. Bailey and Tian (2002: 58-65) believe that ethnic cooking is quite different from the norm; yet, a consumer's attempt to replicate ethnic food at home demonstrates cultural appreciation and willingness to be the medium for further acculturation. Since a person rarely forsakes his own culture, when he learns a new culture, he normally manages acceptable and unacceptable aspects and integrates both cultures in his own unique way (Davies, Fitchett, 2004: 315). For example, a tourist may try cooking American dishes at home, but his cooking tends to be neither that of American nor native foods. That is to say, it is his understanding of American culture, or how he chooses to acculturate with the culture.

American cuisine and Americanization

America is a great country without a national cuisine (Gabaccia, 1998; Mintz, 2002: 23-33). Homogeneous food, such as hamburger, french fries, hotdog, and pizza, cannot be considered a cuisine. Even so, newcomers or visitors perceive them as stereotypically American food. Regional and ethnic foods, such as Pennsylvania Dutch, Native American, Louisiana Creole, Italian, Mexican, Chinese, and Thai foods are parts of diversity. Separately, the homogeneity, the diversity, and even the foods served at American restaurants cannot be called American cuisine since they cannot entirely represent diverse cultures in America (Mintz, 2002).

In culinary history, radical food varied regionally due to the ancestral patterns of land settlement (Jekanowski, Binkley, 2000: 38) and geographic characteristics (Levenstein, 2002: 75-89). Initially, American food was a concoction of cuisines from the three legacies: the early European settlers, native Indians, and slaves from Africa. Later, it was shaped by regionalism when territorial expansion offered plentiful resources (Gabaccia, 1998; Lockwood, Long, 2009: 92). In recent history, the “New American cuisine” started in the 1970s by a chef in California, who incorporated his



French culinary art with local produce (Harris et al., 2005). The new cuisine has grown through restaurant proliferation and later seeped into American homes.

Presently, American eating patterns are defined by two causes, the incessant influx of immigrants and the changes in food production and marketing (Gabaccia, 1998). Foods of new ethnic groups, such as Mexican, Japanese, Korean, Thai, Vietnamese, and Mediterranean, are added into American markets. New technologies, such as inventions to allow easy preparation, longer preservation, mass production, and low-cost and efficient logistics system, have become vital parts of the American food industry (Pillsbury, 1998), and they are major establishments that accelerate the creation of new and adapted ethnic food products and services. Also, demographic and socio-economic factors, such as an increase in the non-white population, aging and health-conscious consumers, working females, long-hour working patterns, at-home and away-from-home food expenditures, and economic crisis, are driving changes in American eating patterns.

Even without a national cuisine, America has a culinary culture, which can be seen in two preferences, the taste for a variety of ethnic specialties and for standardised processed food (Gabaccia, 1998). Gabaccia cites that there are no firm boundaries in American eating habits. Americans always desire to consume ethnic foods and make them a part of their culture. When an ethnic food enters American markets, it would be adjusted to suit American palates. The adjustment or Americanisation is a common practice in the American food industry. In fact, since ethnic ingredients were hardly available and the prices were high (Levenstein, 2002: 75-89), consumers and businesses had little to no choice but to use local substitutes. They had to acculturate (Wallendorf, Reilly, 1983: 292). Seeing a good opportunity, producers have come up with American-versions of ethnic foods (Barbas, 2003). Mintz (2002a) suggests that authentic ethnic food is the one that cannot be shipped nationally. Consequently, simplified, reduced, cheapened, or mass-produced versions of the original way are offered. For that reason, Americans experience cultural losses and are hungry for authenticity. Though the deficit is responded by marketers who try to deliver authentic experiences (Gabaccia, 1998), they are hardly made possible in American markets (Pillsbury, 1998). The failure partially comes from the fact that the “authenticity” concept is based on a static assumption of place and culture. But, as all cultures constantly change, few societies can maintain pure cultures (Sims, 2009: 231-336).



Food knowledge and understanding

Provided that ethnicity has socio-psychological power to affect self-image, consuming ethnic food reflects an attempt to be cosmopolitan, or assimilate foreign cultures (Lu, Fine, 1995: 535-553). As an outcome of growing ethnic contacts and variety seeking, popularity of ethnic consumption persuades Americans to keep up with the trend, and experience different cultures (Lyman, 1989). They are expected to have an ability to recognise and appreciate other cultural beliefs and norms, and respond appropriately to different practices.

Yet, Bailey and Tian (2002: 58-65) and Barbas (2003: 669) agree that Americans have little knowledge of ethnic cuisines. They like the authentic experience concept, but they cannot differentiate if the food is authentic or Americanised. Basically, they try ethnic foods since they are interested in the tastes, and are fairly aware of the level of richness, spiciness, or unusual flavours and ingredients. In many cases, they visit ethnic restaurants only because of price. As affirmed by Lu and Fine (1995: 535-553), many ethnic restaurants rely on the host consumers. They modify traditional recipes and cooking processes, and the outcomes do not deserve to be called authentic. However, if ethnic food is too Americanised, consumers will be dissatisfied with the loss of ethnic distinctiveness. Unfortunately, they are not always aware, or try to make certain, if the restaurant food is authentic. In fact, it is difficult to define ethnic experience if consumers only consume ethnic foods at restaurants. In order to clarify cross-cultural understanding, it is required to recognise the differences in food meanings perceived by the natives who always cook the same cuisine for a life time, the host consumers who eat in exotic restaurants, as well as the ones who eat at ethnic homes. That is, the meanings are deep in the minds of those who prepare the food, those who consume it (Inness, 2001), as well those who market it.

Methodology

The research undertaken in the author's thesis was aimed at Caucasian Americans to answer the question, "*What are the perceived meanings of Thai food, and its associated cultural symbolism, in the United States markets?*"", with the purpose of understanding the symbolic meanings of processed Thai food products and Thai food acculturation.



Research paradigm

The researcher's decision to adopt constructive, interpretive, and qualitative paradigm derived from two reasons. First, the issues relating to the research questions had not been clearly identified and/or addressed by Thai researchers. Any interests in Thai food leaned towards restaurant food with the purpose of supporting the Thai government's "Thai Kitchen to the World" plan, rather than towards processed Thai food products. Since each research endeavour differs greatly according to the context and is not totally interchangeable with others, qualitative exploratory research is best suited in explaining a detailed view of the socially constructed reality that has not been identified (Creswell, 2007).

Second, there are insignificant numbers of Thai ethnic and marketing activities to generate a satisfactory level of Thai cultural visibility in American society. However, the growing popularity of Thai food induces great interest in understanding American values, attitudes, and behaviours, especially when interacting with Thai culture and cultural symbolism. Given that Thai food is a fairly new ethnic product, its values are needed to be confirmed. Moreover, consumer acculturation is a multidimensional process that potentially occurs across generations, a researcher with sufficient time and resources to spend on extensive field research can explore detailed views of American consumers and other related parties by participating in their natural setting (Creswell, 2007).

The researcher approached theoretical perspectives using grounded theory methodology (Glaser, Strauss, 1967). The theory consists of systematic inductive guidelines for data collection (theoretical sampling), analysis (coding, categorising, and constant comparisons), and theoretical frameworks for data interpretation (conceptualisation) (Charmaz, 2005: 507). According to Strauss, Corbin (1990), it is suitable for the discovery of phenomena that are less known and difficult to uncover with quantitative methods. The grounded theory also allows researchers to interview people who are engaging in the phenomena in question, make multiple visits to the field, develop categories of information, and generate a theory grounded in data from the respondents' worldviews (Creswell, 2007). Given the emergent principles of pure grounded theory, this research was more targeted towards specific elements of food



culture. Thus it reflected more grounded research (Whiteley, 2004: 27-46), such that data were to some extent ‘forced’ into specific questions relating to food consumption and symbolism.

Research process

Data triangulation allows the respondent’s theory to emerge from multifaceted data settings (Chadwick et al., 1984: 454). Original respondents were American consumers. Due to the difficulties found in preliminary interviews; that is, Americans had limited knowledge of Thai processed food products, other related parties were also included in the interviews. Out of a total of 162 respondents, the researcher interviewed eight sets of respondents including (American and Thai) consumers, (Thai) exporters, (Thai and Asian) importers, (American, Thai, and Asian) retailers, (Thai) restaurateurs, (American and Thai) food experts, (Thai) government officers, and (Thai) community leaders.

Data collection was conducted in Thailand and the United States from November 2004 to May 2007. According to Bailey and Tian (2002: 58-65), the host-culture consumers, who are primarily Caucasian and highly educated Americans, are more likely to feel comfortable with their own culture, and start exploring other cultures. Thereby, this research focused on the stories of Caucasian Americans who had experiences with Thai food, or Thai people. Four large cities, being Los Angeles-California, Chicago-Illinois, New York City-New York, and Dallas/Fort Worth-Texas, were chosen because the Americans who resided there possibly had more opportunity to encounter different cultures. As multiple realities were needed to enrich the research, interviews in Tacoma-Washington, a small city, were added.

Semi-structured interviews were used to regulate the research direction. However, sets of questions were varied according to the nature of respondents. Also, responsive and situational questions were applied to enhance and probe the respondent’s answers. Since Americans have limited knowledge of Thai culture and symbolism, semiotic tools containing pictures and actual products were applied to stimulate the respondents’ memories.



Findings

Thai food as explained by Thai food experts

Thai food culture has always been related to Thai homes, Buddhist temples, and the royal palace. Its invention, adaptation, and meanings emerge from those influential factors. Buddhist Thais offer well-prepared food to monks on various occasions and rituals, as this signifies a merit making. At the height of the royal Thai courts, the courtiers competitively modified many recipes, presentations, and names as the innovative delicacies were for the interest and well-being of the kings and the royal families. They applied new recipes, ingredients, and techniques brought in by Asian and Western traders and travellers, as well as missionaries. The royal cuisines later entered Thai homes via the courtier families. Today, though the palace role in Thai food culture is not as active, it still is seen, however, as a reference for superior standards.

Thais are very proud of their cuisine. They believe that Thai food is flavourful and good for health. Yet, medicinal herbs are the key to its reputation. Basically, Thai food comes from a local abundance of produce and knowledge. Foreign foods were brought in to increase variety, but they must be adapted to fit Thai palates. Unavailable or unfavourable ingredients will be substituted. Regarding spiciness and sweetness, Thai food experts confirm that Thai food is neither spicy nor sweet. It is consumers' choice to add spiciness or sweetness into their food.

Thai food in the United States markets

For Americans, Thai food and Thailand are exotic.

I think people think it's exotic. Like the new lead thing. You're urban. You're college. You don't eat hamburger.

Exotic is a preferable word to label Thai culture since it is still "foreign." Exotic holds a symbolic power that entices consumers to seek out new cuisines and cultural exchanges. Regarding functional aspects, American respondents were impressed with the unique flavours and valued herbal ingredients. Spiciness and sweetness were prominent characteristics of Thai food since they contrasted well with the bland and plain flavours of basic American food. Yet, too spicy or too sweet food was negatively perceived. Though Thai food is labelled as a hot cuisine, social preference encouraged



many Americans to try Thai food. Since the method used in Thai restaurants was more of a stir-fry than deep-fry cooking, Thai food was perceived as lighter food or having less fat, as well as freshly-cooked food with vegetables. Also, since the respondents hardly saw overweight Thais in Thai restaurants, they assumed that Thai food was healthier. In conclusion, Thai food was best suited to the current health trend, but health was not the only deciding factor. Most respondents preferred varieties of flavours and choices.

Thai food is one of the few foods that seem to bridge many gaps. Bring people together. For example, I know very conservative people who don't really like Chinese food, don't really like Japanese food, but then for whatever reason they eat Thai food.

Most respondents were unfamiliar with processed Thai food products since they did not cook Thai food and usually consumed at Thai restaurants. Thus, they did not recognize Thai ingredients. For example, they thought pictures of ingredients on food packages were just parts of decoration. Thai symbolism such as language, names, and designs were good representations of authenticity. The respondents did not recognize them as Thainess, but they were foreign or exotic enough to imply “Not American products”. Since Thai restaurants were the main sources of Thai food knowledge and interactions, consumers’ understanding, derived from what they learned in Thai restaurants, was sometimes inaccurate.

Is that the curry with coconut and all that? I love that, but I didn't know that was green. Is that green? What I got is more white?

Due to its uniqueness and popularity among consumers and mass media, other ethnic restaurants utilised Thai cuisine. They offered Thai-style food, or their version of Thai food.



I recommend “Houston” for real American food. American food is a melting pot, so I am not surprised if Houston has other ethnic foods about 20%. It has something called Thai Jungle Soup.

There is Thai-style pasta. I didn’t see any Japanese-style pasta. I didn’t see any Vietnamese-style. I didn’t see other type of pasta. All Italian and one Thai-style. And I’ve seen that often. That kind of makes Thai a little special on the menu and stuff. It seems like cooks are able to incorporate Thai style with other styles in the good way.

However, their understanding was stereotypical, which was either “sweet” or “spicy.”

You can go to a normal American place and if they want a little variety on their menu, often they put Thai and that just means either spicy or sweet.

Lots of time restaurant food isn’t the same. It’s like Americanised. It would be like sweet.

Authentic food

American respondents, who valued authentic food for a cultural experience, wanted Thai restaurants to maintain the elements that made Thai food unique, believing authentic food would sustain its values. Mild adaptation was acceptable, while what was arguable by many Thais should not be advertised as authentic food.

Lots of the recipes are hundreds or thousands of years old. I don’t know how old. So, traditionally, they were used as medicine. I’m sure that this recipe and herbal usage had come from ages, from that time. Traditionally, we should keep them intact. Once, we start to go too much in different directions with thing like that, then it’s gonna lose its authenticity and effectiveness.

American and Thai respondents agreed that average Americans did not recognise authentic Thai food. They indicated the authenticity from where most Thais



ate, or if the restaurateurs were Thais. Americans who had close contacts with Thais or visited Thailand sought authentic Thai food. Consumers who appreciated authentic experiences often disliked ethnic food products that was cooked or produced by Americans or other ethnics.

I said Sawasdee krap. Sabuy dee rua krab. He looked at me like I'm crazy. He said, "I'm not Thai." I said, "I'm sorry. I thought you were Thai". My wife said, "Anybody is here, Thai?" "No, we're not Thai. We're from Indonesia. We cook Chinese, but we know how to cook Thai." We said, "Forget it".

I often go to Vietnamese restaurants and they're all Chinese. I ask if they're Chinese from Vietnam or China. If they're from China, I don't want to eat here.

Thai food acculturation

There are two degrees of food acculturation, eating and cooking. Americans mainly acculturated Thai processed food products through restaurant food since they rarely were acquainted with Thais or someone who cooked Thai food. They often started with widely available Americanised Thai food, the food that was adapted to suit the American palates. Thai food must be a favourite before becoming a part of daily life. At that point, Thai food is acculturated into American homes. Americans may start cooking Thai food for fun or adding Thai ingredients into their cooking. However, a respondent's story conveyed a doubtful future for Thai food acculturation. It was a result of inadequate understanding of Thai cuisine and ingredients. Cooking Thai food at American homes presumably continues to be very rare.

Today I put turmeric, green tea...I didn't have any tomato so I just put fresh salsa in there and then Thai pepper...I don't know how. I try, though. So I did the soup stuff. I started making the soup after I had Tom Yum. I try to make Thai style, Thai stuff with pepper. Now I put pepper in anything.



Since the American food industry is highly competitive, restaurateurs and marketers like borrowing popular cuisines. They apply unique parts of Thai food to differentiate their products, Americanised or fusion food. In fact, they sometimes apply only the word “Thai”, coming from the fact that Thai food represents a fine cuisine, without using any parts of Thai cuisine or ingredients. Except for some outstanding dishes such as Pad Thai and Tom Yum.

They have like special Thai chicken salad or something. That's actually something that's good to know. And a lot of American places. No, not only American, but like I'm speaking from an American's standpoint...They try to do a Thai style. You're knowing Thai food. I'm knowing Thai food. We go and we eat and like ooh, not Thai at all. But it's the representation to Americans who don't know Thai food, of what Thai food would be like if they're familiar with it.

Cultural appreciation

Thai food possesses desirable functional benefits, including complex flavours and unique herbs. In time as Americans become more familiar with Thai food, they may select it using basic determinants, such as flavours, physical wellness, convenience, and price. Thus, the ever-lasting emotional benefit of Thainess, conveyed through Thai symbolism and personal relationships between Americans and Thais, as well as cultural activities and media, can potentially enhance cultural appreciation and food marketing.

I forgot one of the great things about Thai food. It's the family style. That's so cool. That's the social thing. Instead of I'm going to get my food. Nobody can touch my food. All for me, me, me. That's so American. Me, my, mine. Like we all share. Ah, I like that. That's the big thing I like. Kind of like sharing. Try this, try this. There is something new. And then you put on your plate. You can change it if you want. Like add a little more spice, whatever. I like that. That's something I forgot to mention. Thai is very social. I think Thai people like to talk and eat together. It seems very welcoming.



Thai symbolism is largely a creation of Thai marketers. The extent of their work depends on their knowledge and budget. It is important to understand that the degree of acculturation depends on how Thais educate Americans and how much, and in which way, they experience Thai food and culture.

I think that's why I was saying that Thai, the key learning about Thailand is through the food because you see it on the menu. Hopefully, people are more interested and smart and driven to find out why they like Thai food. I was lucky enough that I had the opportunity to go there forcibly...Food is a good key to open the door.

Unfortunately, there are indications that Thai producers lack accurate knowledge regarding authentic recipes and food culture, required for creating meaningful symbolism.

Discussion

American respondents demonstrate a strong food culture and suggest diverse eating patterns. However, the diverse consumption was a rather recent phenomenon. Americans may have long embraced the concept of diversity, but the respondents reported the lack of actual food experience due to its unavailability during their childhood. Some respondents are loyal to their familiar food, but the prevalence of ethnic restaurants encourages others to explore several kinds of food. Though some respondents indicated Thai food as their preference, their daily choices were circumstantial. It suggested that Thai food was just one of the ethnic choices.

Bailey and Tian (2002) found that preparing ethnic dishes at home was a way to express a cultural appreciation. Yet, consumers tended to have a cross-cultural cooking style, which was their interpretation of another culture. In fact, their preference and ingredient availability are crucial factors. Moreover, there were apparent indications of selective acculturation. The respondents demonstrated limited consumption patterns. They mostly did not try many Thai dishes. Some were loyal to very few dishes. Regarding cooking, the ones who tried Thai cooking were closely related to Thais, or had visited Thailand. Yet, they often had insufficient knowledge



and ingredients. As Barbas (2003) suggested, the popularity of ethnic foods had done little to contribute to the cultural understanding. This statement corresponds with the findings. The indifference in learning about Thai culture is overwhelming. Even with positive attitudes, most respondents had limited knowledge about Thai culture, cultural symbolism, and Thailand, and seldom expressed any interest to learn beyond the food consumption.

We are not as educated on Thailand in America as we should be, especially being that there are so many Thai dishes shown on the menu, right? It's kind of weird contradiction when we think we know something, we really don't.

As intermarriage is a factor affecting acculturation (2004), the findings confirm its importance. The respondents who married Thais had more understanding of Thai values and norms, demonstrated more cultural appreciation, and paid more attention to authenticity. Also, tourism is another key factor. Americans who visited Thailand saw the importance of marketing authentic Thai food. Particularly the ones who learned Thai cooking in Thailand, they preferred authentic to cross-cultural cooking. Unfortunately, they had difficulties interpreting Thai recipes and finding authentic ingredients.

It said, "Steam the rice" and I used the rice cooker. They don't mean cook the rice. They mean, "Steam it, like steamed vegetables." You cannot find like fresh coconut cream. You can go to the market. Like when we were in Thailand, we went to the market and they made that right there. You can buy canned coconut milk, but I could not find coconut cream anywhere. Finally, I did find some, but I want it fresh.

Conclusion

The findings confirmed a high degree of Thai food acculturation among Americans. However, the apparent pattern indicated the adoption at the level of restaurant consumption, rather than home cooking. In that sense, it does not greatly increase the benefits of Thai food exportation, as the researcher expected to find that



Americans consumed more processed Thai food products and adopted Thai cooking into their homes. Moreover, the findings found the indifference in learning beyond food consumption. Yet, food activity is pleasurable. Since Thai food has become a social interest, it is prospective to say that it is a gateway, or a first step to learn about Thai culture and Thailand. However, cultural appreciation is the key to a high degree of food acculturation and marketing.

Thai food is dissimilar with the basics of American food culture, especially in terms of ingredients and cooking style. It is possible that the adoption of Thai food will encounter a long period of stagnation before diffusion. Some respondents suggested that it would occur when the next generations grew up with Thai food. In conclusion, since there are many ethnic foods in America, Thai marketers must comprehend American consumers, their culture, as well as Thai food and cultural symbolism, in order to enhance the values of Thai food.

Limitation and recommendations

Language barriers and difficulties in interpreting other cultures propose major risks for a cross-cultural research. Moreover, regarding the nature of qualitative research, the rigorous research process and audit, data triangulation, and extended period in the field can enhance trustworthiness. Also, it is a stepping stone for further quantitative research. Reflecting on Chinese food which has been in America for over one hundred years and remained an ethnic food, in order to enhance long-term sustainability, the Thai food industry needs *additional research to clarify consumer motivation, explore market segments, and define favourable product elements and marketing activities*. Also, Americans demonstrate the feeling of a ‘lack of culture.’ Fortunately, they have good attitudes towards Thai culture and value authenticity. Thus, Thai producers should be aware of the risks in favouring customers and customising until cultural identity is lost. Yet, forcing Thai culture on Americans is also risky. *To be more complete, comparative research about preferential elements towards authentic, Americanised, and fusion food is required.*



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