

Thai Food in Malaysia: Diagnosing Restaurant Operators' and Patrons Acceptance Levels

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Abstract

This empirical study investigates the extent that the Malaysian restaurant operators and customers accept the Thai food. Any changes in customers' eating patterns of the local cuisines are also evaluated. Restaurant operators and customers in three Malaysia northern states (Perlis, Kedah and Penang) were selected as a sample. Both restaurant operators and customers saw a trend towards Thai foods which are becoming well accepted in this country. Nevertheless, the popularity of Thai food is not to the extent of outshining the local food. Thai foods were found to be not consumed everyday by the local people, but rather as an option or alternative or as part of leisure dining. Another remarkable finding is that respondents seemed to agree that Thai food is internationally popular than the Malaysian food. This indication has significant implications to the related authorities as to why Malaysian food is not as popular as Thai food internationally in spite of having a distinctive flavour and diversity of taste.

Keywords: Thai Food, Patron, Operators, Restaurant, Acceptance level, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Many countries in this world are believed to have more than one nation or ethnic groups with different culture, linguistic, religious, behavioral and biological trait. The diverse ethnic and cultural groups in society have created

a dynamic growth in the varieties of ethnic foods (Jamal, 1996; Iqbal, 1996; Bailey & Tian, 2002; Leung, 2002; Jamal, 2003; Josiam & Monteiro, 2004; Hwang & Reynolds, 2005; Verbeke & Lopez, 2005). Iqbal (1996) states that during 60's although in diverse populations each ethnic is seen much individualistic in cultural practices, education and food. Nevertheless, through the process of acculturation, assimilation and continual first hand contact among the groups of individuals the differences in cultural activities and foods are lessened and yet come into a common pattern. Through these processes the American foods which were mostly influenced by the Italian, French, Irish and other countries became Americanized (Monteiro, 2004). The same goes to other countries in the western and eastern world.

In Malaysia, the process of acculturation and assimilation among the Malays, Chinese, Indians and other ethnic group in Sabah and Sarawak in the early 1970s not only unite those ethnic groups culturally, economically but have added to the potpourri of local foods and created a Malaysian cultural and gastronomical heritage (Appadurai, 1996). For instance, nasi lemak, laksa, roti jala and many others claimed as a traditional Malay food, chapattis, naan, puree as Indian, Char kway teow, chili crab, sweet and sour soup as Chinese and many others are well accepted as Malaysian foods. Many ethnic restaurants, hawkers or street stalls in this country are seen of offering such a combination of foods. In fact, many of these restaurants now do a little bit of everything to keep up with changing trends and satisfy customers' wide-ranging tastes. According to Lee (1998) this limelight is very much due to the political stability and close inter-cultural relations among the ethnic groups, along with the government roles. Ramli et al (2003) notes that the array of foods and restaurants in Malaysia were burgeoning and old styles of restaurant setup which merely provided for basic selling and buying food are over.

Othman et al. (2005) contends that apart from affirmative actions taken by the government through transformation of plan and policies for the nation, three other external factors were found contributed to the prosperity and changes in Malaysian food. First, the emergence of technology and development of modern equipment such as sophisticated cooling, freezing, heating and as well as other products have enabled the chefs and cooks to create new dishes in their operation. Second is the availability of convenience food items and easy access to raw material such as vegetables, meat and spices. Lastly, simplicity in terms of styles and methods of cooking food also add value to these changes. Shamsuddin and Selamat (2005) on the hand argue that the influence and absorption of foreign food into the local taste mainstream have also had a significant impact on Malaysian food. For instance, the use of western style cooking, concepts of service, advanced equipment as well as fast service and efficient delivery of foods by the fast food restaurants indirectly augment the customers' taste and appetite (Zahari et al., 2006). The same applies to the acceptance of customers on a growing contemporary cuisine from the neighboring countries especially Thailand and Indonesia. Nevertheless, Malaysia and Indonesia have been claimed to share the same cuisine treasures, therefore this paper specifically focuses on Thai food despite Thailand sharing a border with Malaysia in the northern area.

Thai foods have been catching up for long in Malaysia. Based on personally observation it is really making waves in the last 20 years. According to Othman et al (2009) the number of restaurants offering Thai food continuing booming not only in the large cities, small town but spreading vary fast even in secluded areas. This is evident as many of the Malay restaurants in particular incorporate some of the popular Thai food in their menus to suit the customers' wide range of taste and demand. Restaurants which sell Thai food are seen of quite packed with customers especially at dinner time. Some restaurant operators in fact, hire Thai cooks from Southern Thailand just to cater for the local customers. This phenomenon has raised the question to whether this neighboring country's food has outshone the local food. In other words, is Thai food engulfing the popularity of the Malaysian food? If these assumptions hold true it will directly gives significant impact to the Malaysian food. The future young generations in particular might not recognize their country culinary treasures but more praise to the foreign dishes. The restaurant operators on the other hand will surely offer only Thai food to the local customers and in turn contribute to the popularity of this foreign dish to the international tourists. With that issues, the present study is diagnosing the restaurant operators' and customers' levels of acceptance towards Thai food. In addition, it examines which food is internationally accepted from operators and customers perspectives.

2. Methodology

As this study sets out to whether it support and strengthened the result of previous studied undertaken by Othman et a (2008) in the city of Shah Alam or otherwise, the restaurant operators and customers in three Malaysia northern states (Perlis, Kedah, Pulau Pinang) were selected as a sample. However, since this study is a self funding it would be practically impossible to collect data from every single element in the population as would be too costly and prohibitively time consuming. In addition, owing to large number of restaurants in these areas only those who are serving Thai foods and customers who had experienced dining at those restaurants are chosen. Prior to this decision, a preliminary survey looking at the restaurants' profiles based on information gathered from

respective authorities was carried out. The number of restaurants that met the criteria was around twenty (20). It was also decided to obtain 30 completed surveys from each restaurant customer, which would reach the total of 600 respondents. This number would give a sample large enough for vigorous statistical analysis.

2.1 Instrument Design

There are two instrument designs employed in this study. For the qualitative approach, the semi-structured interview questions were developed for the restaurants operators. The structured questions developed for the interview. The questions were designed in an interactive way to clearly elicit and develop a relaxing and friendly atmosphere to obtain high quality information during the interview. All the questions were created by the researchers in addressing the objectives of the study. The questions are shown in the Table 1.

For quantitative, a self-reported customers experience through questionnaire survey is developed in obtaining the required information. Considering the difference in customers' profiles and educational levels, the questions was simple and easy understands with minimum reading and writing. Twenty three questions were designed in examining the acceptance level of respondents' toward Thai foods. Items required respondents to indicate their level of agreement on a five types Likert scale ranging from one (1) with "totally disagree" to five (5) with "totally agree". All items were directly replicated from Othman, et, al (2008).

2.2 Data Collection Process

Prior to actual data collection, all identified restaurant operators were contacted to acquire their willingness to participate in the research study. Most of the operators however were too busy with business and barely available to take part. In the end, only 6 restaurants operators were willing to be interviewed. The dates, times for the interviews and surveys to be conducted were then arranged based on the convenience of the operators. In absent of any obvious problems, the interviews were successfully undertaken with the full cooperation of the restaurant operators lasted between thirty minutes and one hour with all sessions were the tape-recorded.

With the permission of each restaurant operators, the survey questionnaire was also administered during the interview session at each restaurant by the research team. Restaurant patrons were approached and requested to complete the survey. The information on the anonymity and confidentiality was provided to the restaurant patrons through the information sheet attached to the questionnaire. This information sheet provided the details about the researcher, the aim of the study and the purpose of the survey to be conducted. A total of 400 usable questionnaires were obtained for data analysis.

Both data collected were then the processed. All interviews were transcribed using pen portrait analysis. This is the part where all the words, expressions, pausing were stated in the text form clearly and definitely like the 'voice' form one. The process was done properly to prevent any important ideas missing. As for the quantitative survey, the questionnaires were then coded and keyed for analysis using a Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS) version 17.0. The data were tested for reliability using the Cronbach alpha procedure and the alpha coefficient value of .763 was achieved.

3. Analyses and Results

3.1 Restaurant Profiles

The six restaurants participated in this study were among the most popular ones in its locality or surrounding area. All of them have been in the business for more than 10 years with ten to fifteen staffs and selling the Malay self service food on day time but concentrating on the Malay and Thai ala carte or cook to order food in the dinner times. All restaurants have incorporated most the popular Thai dishes the menu. Some of the restaurants were having two or three cooks from the Southern Thailand. The profiles of all restaurants are simplified and p resented in Table 2:

3.2 Reasons of Selling Thai Food

The first question asked related to reasons of selling or incorporating Thai food in the restaurant. All six restaurant operators (A, B, C, D, E and F) have given almost identical answers. The main reasons are due to the great demand and it acceptability among the local customers. Owner of Restaurant A for instance noted that some of Thai dishes having similar characteristics as Malay food with blending of sour, sweet and spicy taste. With that hallmark, Thai food is not only suitable for Malaysian but suit all appetites. He added that

"If there are great demand from the customers, why keep my self behind the other restaurant operators. If I can make more money through selling the Thai food why not we go for it"

In considering of incorporating Thai food in the menu, restaurant A owner claimed that;

"I sat together with my staffs to discuss about incorporating Thai food in the menu. Everyone came out with positive comments and good opinions. With that, I finally hired two cooks from Southern Thai specifically handling these neighbouring country cuisines.

Restaurant B's owner stated that Thai food becoming popular among the local owing to the tremendous demand by the customers. In this case, the owner revealed that:

"They (customers) always order and asked for Thai food. Of course they have the right. We must be an idiot if we ignore and lost them just because of not selling Thai food! It (market) was so lucrative. At that time, I realized that I should sell it. That's the real boost for my restaurant."

Unlike Restaurant A and B, Restaurant C was represented by the daughter of the owner in the interview. Having advantage of operating in own land, she claimed that:

"Thai food is delicious and I always believed that. We should follow the global trend. Thai food has been recognized globally. Okay...let's make it simple. You are a customer and I'm a restaurant operator...right? So, you want the best food...the delicious food. It's basic... I want my customer to get their very best. So, I go for it (Thai food)."

Restaurant D was the only restaurant that has a branch in other area. Situated in three different area (Arau, Permatang Pauh and Kangar), they captured a large number of customers. According to the owner, customer needs and wants are far more important and that was the main motive behind the integrating Thai food in their menu. Quoted verbatimly;

"Customers or consumers have their rights. They are not stupid and their level of demand on Thai food is actually increasing. You can see that from day to day, the Thai food locally accepted. There are a lot of Thai restaurant in this country now. So I take this opportunity to have it (Thai food) in our menu and open a new branch to attract new target market (customer)."

As for Restaurant E, the owner noted that her restaurant has advantage on its location that is among the higher educational institutions and government offices. Government servants and students were among the loyal patrons. She quoted that:

"For me, customer needs and wants is priority. I always ask them and do some survey what kinds of food that they most preferred. The answer is our local and Thai foods. So, I start incorporating Thai food to the menu and I have fulfilled my customer's needs. That makes me happy!"

Dealing with seafood and Malay traditional dish, Restaurant F is currently incorporating some of Thai food in their menu. The owner stated that Thai food has its own unique flavours that have similar characteristic to local foods. He believes that this neighbouring food is well accepted by our local as well as international tourists. He said:

"The acceptance level of customers towards Thai food shocked me. So, I take this opportunity to sell it (Thai food)."

3.3 Kinds of Thai food Incorporated in the Restaurant Menu

The second questions asked related to the kinds of Thai food selling in the restaurant. Again most answers were identical. Restaurant A for instance noted that Tom Yam, Paprik, Nampruk were among the popular dishes ordered by the customer. He said that:

"In one day, 20 -30 of the same dishes order by the customers. I tell you, Tom Yam, paprik, Namphrik (sweet & sour) and Pattaya fried rice are the most popular one and been repetitive ordered by the customer."

Restaurant B, C and D operators revealed that before incorporating Thai food in the menu the verbal surveyed was undertaken and most of the customers keep urging to include those kinds of food.

Quoted verbatimly from Restaurant C:

"I found that not all of the Thai food embraced by the customers. So I do some survey and found out several items are accepted by the locals. Tom Yam, Pattaya Fried Rice and Paprik are most popular."

By having four cooks from Thailand, restaurant F offer more varieties of Thai food in the menu. Besides Tom Yam, Paprik, Pattaya fried rice and Namphrik (sweet & sour), lakna fried rice and kaengsom are their own specialty. He stated:

"Everybody offer the same Thai food to the customers and they are competing to each other. They do not have something unique or specialty item to attract them. Therefore, Lakna fried rice and Kaengsom were included in our menu. Surprisingly, this item is so engrossed by the customers."

3.4 Do Thai Food is outshining the Malay food

The third question asked was “Do you think Thai food outshines the local food?” From the answers received, majority of the restaurant operator totally rejected the idea that Thai foods have outshone the Malay or local food as only few of them popular in this country like Tom yam, padprik , Namprik) and one or two salads. Furthermore, they claimed that all those items were adjusted to suit the local despite the elements of pungent, spicy, sweet and sour are still maintained. Some of the answers were;

I don't think so, as only few of them popular.

No, Thai food are only popular at night. Local foods are still preferred for lunch.

No, can you take Thai food at all meals, but I can take Malay food at any time.

No, Thai food are only suitable when it is eaten hot.

Undeniable, customers like Thai food but would them dare take it everyday.

However, most of them change their opinion when they were probed with the question “What about in international arena?” In line with that, all restaurant operators interviewed without doubt agreed that the Thai foods are most popular overseas compared to the Malays or so to speak Malaysian food. Restaurant B owner for example claimed that;

“Malaysian food!!!! Slightly far compare to Thai food internationally. Look at London for instance, how many Malaysian restaurant there? Hundred of Thai restaurants can be found around that city alone. This is amazing”

Similar notions were given by other restaurants operators. Despite that the most remarkable and interesting answer was given by restaurant F operator. He noted that;

“At this stage we are behind Thailand on the number of restaurant overseas. Not only they are popular with tourism but same goes to restaurant. I ever personally asked the international tourist about it. As I expected, the answer given explicitly inclined toward Thai food. However, we will get there if great effort is being put into it”

3.5 The Acceptance Levels of Customers toward Thai Food

The descriptive statistic looking at the mean scores of the all items related the acceptance level of customers toward Thai food was employed. The findings are presented in Table 3.

Looking at the table, respondents clearly reported themselves as somewhat disagreeing that Thai food provides overall better taste than the local food (M= 1.50) and they took Thai food because they were bored with the local food (M=1.35). They also tended to disagree that Thai foods were more popular than local (M=1.40) and western food (M=1.44). With this level of impression, it is not surprising that they expressed that Thai food is only suitable to be eaten in a specific meal (M=3.25), believing only a few Thai foods are popular in this country (3.57) therefore they take this food as an alternative (M=3.22). This notion is supported as they somewhat disagreed that they would always take Thai food (M= 2.41), were less sure that this food can be served at any meal (M= 2.34) and disagreed that Thai food has more variety compared to the local food (M= 2.41).

A similar pattern of views occurred on few items. For instance, respondents clearly expressed themselves of taking Thai food occasionally (M=4.57). They indeed believed that Thai food is simple to prepare (M= 3.06), only suitable to be served hot (M= 3.51), at dinner time (M= 3.89), as cook to order food (M=3.34), and similar to Chinese food (M= 3.51). Together these points indicate that the majority of respondents were only taking Thai food as an option rather than being attached it at all times. In other words, they persistently believed that local foods are still their first choice or saw themselves as being in favor of the local food compared to Thai food. This notion is probably best explained by higher mean score given by the respondents to the item “*despite liking Thai food the local food is still my first choice*” with the mean score (M=3.66).

Nevertheless, despite those views, it is interesting to note that respondents implicitly agreed that more people in this country now go for Thai food (M= 3.61) and Thai food is well accepted by the local people (M=4.46). Not only do the respondents highly believe that Thai food suits all appetites (3.19) and will take almost any type of Thai food as long as it is halal (3.59) and are willing to eat this food despite the price being a little bit higher (M= 2.90). These results show that Thai food blends well with the taste of the local people and is well established in this country. This notion is further strengthened as respondents strongly agreed with the item related to “*Thai food being internationally more popular than the local food*” . In fact, this is perhaps the most interesting result of this analysis. The interest lies in the fact that the mean score at was the highest rating (M = 4.73) given by the respondents. In actual fact, this notion probably hold true as this question is asked as it is a matter of fact rather than opinion.

4. Implications and Conclusion

This study highlighted a range of interesting and significant findings. Customers and restaurant operators saw a number of Thai foods like Tom yam and its varieties, padrik, nam prik of its kinds and a few salads as trendy, well accepted and continuously making waves in this country. The spiciness, sweet and sour and pungency of these dishes seem to blend well with the local customers' taste. This is evident when customers claimed they were familiar with some of the Thai dishes here. In actual fact, this is holding true and supports the previous study findings of Othman et al. (2009) that few Thai foods are really popular in Malaysia despite being modified to suit the local taste. Nevertheless, despite being increasingly established in popularity, Thai food has not reached the extent of outshining the local food. Thai foods are found not to be taken everyday by the local people, but rather as an option or alternative or for leisure dining. They are more acceptable at dinner time as a cook to order food. With such perceptions, it is worthwhile to suggest that the restaurant operators and those who intend to venture into this business, besides offering only Malaysian food, should at least consider incorporating some of the popular Thai dishes especially in the dinner menu. Assimilating some of the Thai dishes in the menu does not mean the operators praise or popularize the foreign dishes, it is more of a strategy of complying with the current local customers' eating habits as well as adding to the assortment of foods in this country.

Another interesting issue and in fact the most remarkable finding of this study is that respondents seem to endorse Thai food as being internationally popular than Malaysian food. This result in fact is in line with the result of the survey undertaken by the Kellogg School of Management and Sasini Institute (2004) which revealed that Thai food is ranked at number four after Italian, French and Chinese by western respondents when asked to name ethnic cuisines. It also ranked six behind Italian, French, Japanese, Chinese and Indian for the question, "What are respondents' favorite cuisines?" One might argue that the influx of inbound international tourists to Thailand has contributed to the popularity of this country's food. To some extent this is probably true however, that is not the only reason. The aggressive Thai government participation in promotional campaigns has also boosted Thai food in the international arena. The "Kitchen of the World" project in recent years, besides others is one of the examples. This project aims to increase the number of Thai restaurants overseas and the government encourages Thai investors to invest in Thai restaurants overseas and provides support in the form of training, information and financial loans. The Thai government approved a 500 million baht budget for the project to help interested individuals (Sunanta (2005). As of 2004, there were 6,875 Thai restaurants overseas with 49 % of them in the United States and Canada, 20 % in Europe, 15 % in Australia and New Zealand, 14 % in Asia and 2% in other countries and the majority of them are owned by the Siamese. This project in fact has shown some significant outcomes, as of 2006 a total of 11,037 known Thai restaurants dotted the globe. This number is expected to have increased to 20,000 in 2010 (Tsui, 2006).

The above indicators have given significant implications to the related authorities as to why Malaysian food is not as popular as Thai food internationally, in spite of having a more distinctive flavour and diversity of taste with the mixture of Malay, Chinese, Indian and Eurasian. In fact, to most of the international tourists Malaysia is known as a food heaven. In relation to this, several promotional strategies should be undertaken by the government or the responsible authorities by continuously organizing food projects or events perhaps in a bigger scale as a platform to introduce Malaysia as a paradise for epicureans.

The introduction "Malaysia Kitchen" at the end of 2006 with the purpose of increasing the number of Malaysian restaurants overseas can be seen as an opportunity to popularize the Malaysia gastronomy internationally. Besides the 'Malaysia Kitchen' other promotional activities such as creative cooking tours, food related events, Malaysia International Gourmet Festival and Halal Hub program can be used as means in boosting the Malaysian food internationally. From such promotional ventures, it does not only generate foreign income through sales of food overseas but also popularizes the Malaysian gastronomy products among the potential international tourists.

As a conclusion, the collaboration and cooperation between food operators, travel agencies and government related authorities and other stakeholders are therefore crucial or should be further strengthened in promoting Malaysia food or gastronomic products to the international arena. Failure to develop such a commonality of approach may lead to this phrase.

"Despite thousand of wonderful food products this country have, it could be meaningless if no collective and continuous effort of utilizing the available resources and promoting them".

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Table 1. Semi Structure Question used for Restaurant Operators

ITEMS
Why make you selling Thai food in your restaurant?
What sort of Thai food incorporated in your restaurant menu? Why?
What is the most popular Thai food in your restaurant?
Do you think Thai food is outshining the Malay food, Why?
Do you think Thai food is internationally popular than Malaysian food. Why?

Table 2. Restaurant profiles

Restaurants	Type of Food	No. of Staffs	Years in Operation	Market Segment
A	Malay & Thai Food	12	15 years	Family, young and Middle age groups
B	Malay, Thai & Western Food	13	20 years	Family, young and Middle age groups
C	Malay, Thai & Western Food	15	8 years	Family, young and Middle age groups
D	Malay, Thai & Chinese Food	15	15 years	Family, young and Middle age groups
E	Malay & Thai Food	13	9 years	Family, young and Middle age groups
F	Malay, Seafood & Thai Food	11	18 years	Family, young and Middle age groups

Table 3. Showing the mean of importance to respondents of patronizing restaurants

No	Items	n	Mean	S.D
1.	Thai food gives a better taste than a local food	310	1.50	.500
2.	I take Thai food because I am bored with the local food	310	1.35	.786
3.	I think Thai food are more popular than local food	310	1.40	.491
4.	I believed Thai food much more popular than the western food in this country	310	1.44	.738
5.	Thai food only suitable to be eaten in a specific meal	310	3.25	.918
6.	Only few Thai food popular in this country	310	3.57	1.08
7.	Thai food as an alternative for me	310	3.22	.860
8.	I will be always taking Thai food	310	2.41	.786
9.	Thai food can be served at any time	310	2.34	.843
10.	Thai food has more varieties compared to the local food	310	2.41	.722
11.	I take Thai food occasionally	310	4.57	.508
12.	Thai food is simple to prepare than most the local food	310	3.06	.923
13.	Thai food only suitable to be served hot	310	3.51	.937
14.	I only take Thai food at dinner time	310	3.89	.855
15.	Thai food is only suitable for cook to order	310	3.34	.965
16.	Thai food is similar to the Chinese food	310	3.51	.827
17.	Despite liking Thai food the local food still my first choice	310	3.66	1.08
18.	More peoples in this country now goes for Thai food	310	3.61	.926
19.	Thai food is well accepted by local people	310	4.46	.554
20.	Thai food suit to all appetites	310	3.19	.900
21.	I will take almost any types of Thai food as long as its halal	310	3.59	1.13
22.	Despite the price little bit higher I still love Thai food	310	2.90	.917
23.	I believed Thai food are internationally accepted than the local food	310	4.73	.441