

DO THAI FOODS OUTSHINE MALAYSIAN FOODS LOCALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY?

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ABSTRACT

This empirical study investigated to what extent the local restaurant customers accept Thai food. In addition, this study also evaluated any changes in customers' eating patterns of local cuisines. Restaurant customers in the Shah Alam area were selected as a sample. One notable finding was that respondents saw a trend towards Thai foods which are becoming well accepted in this country. Nevertheless, despite the increasingly popularity of Thai food it was 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 interesting issue and in fact the most remarkable finding of this study was that respondents seemed to agree that Thai food is more popular and internationally accepted than Malaysian food. This indication has significant implications for 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.

Keyword: Thai food, customers, local cuisine, acceptance level, internationally

BACKGROUND

Many researchers have commented that the diverse ethnic and cultural groups in society in certain countries have led to a dynamic growth in the varieties of ethnic foods (Jamal, 1996; Bailey & Tian, 2002; Leung, 2002; Jamal, 2003; Josiam & Monteiro; 2004; Hwang & Reynolds, 2005; Verbeke & Lopez, 2005). Nevertheless, through acculturation or 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 this process most of the American foods which were mostly influenced by the Italian, French, Irish and other countries in the western world became Americanized. In a similar way in Malaysia, acculturation and assimilation among Malays, Chinese, and Indians in the early 1970s have added to the potpourri of local foods and have created a Malaysian cultural and gastronomical heritage. For instance, nasi Lemak claimed as a traditional Malay food, chapattis as Indian, Char kway teow as Chinese and

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many others no longer belong to one single ethnic group, but are well accepted as Malaysian foods. This is well proven by the many ethnic restaurants and street stalls in this country offering such a combination of foods. According to Lee (1988) 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) noted that in line with this development, the array of foods and restaurants in Malaysia were burgeoning. They in fact argued that the old styles of restaurant setup which merely provided for basic selling and buying food are over.

Othman et al. (2005) named three other factors contributing 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.

Apart from the above factors, Shamsuddin and Selamat (2005) argued 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 by customers of a growing contemporary cuisine from the neighbouring 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.

In the last ten years Thai food has been making waves in Malaysia. This is not to generalize, but the number of restaurants offering Thai food in this country is on the rise. Thai food is flourishing not only in the large cities but even in secluded areas. Thai food is now seen to be well accepted as most restaurant businesses incorporate this cuisine in their menus to suit the customers' wide range of taste. This can clearly be seen as most of the restaurants which sell Thai food are quite packed with customers especially during dinner time. Changes in customers' tastes and eating out habits probably caused this boom. Some restaurant operators in fact, hire Thai cooks from Southern Thailand just to cater for the local customers. Based on personal experience, the most popular Thai dishes among the Malaysian customers are the kinds of Padthai, Nam Phrik, Yam and Tom Yam Goong. To better understand these dishes they are explained as follows:

- Pad Thai – A stir fry dish which is influenced by Chinese styles and is most popular in Thailand. It includes vegetables, beef, chicken, seafood or a combination of them.

- Nam Phri – Cili paste in various meat or fresh seafood dishes and cooked in a sweet and sour sauce flavour.
- Yam – A kind of Thai salad with a blended dressing comprising fish sauce, salt, lemon juice, chili, shallot and garlic. A popular salad includes shrimp, mango, papaya and beef.
- Tom Yam Goong – A pungent flavoured Thai soup originating from a boiling technique and popular all over Thailand.

Nevertheless, in this country some names of those dishes are modified to make them more understandable by the customers and to accommodate the local palate. They are altered a little despite no significant changes in terms of ingredients. For instance, Pad Thai is popularly known as padprik in this country while Nam Phrik is known as “three flavours sauce” or “sos tiga rasa”. The rapid growth of Thai food in this country has raised the question as to whether this neighbouring country’s food has outshone the local food. In other words, is Thai food engulfing the popularity of the Malaysian food. In researching this, the following objectives were set:

- to find the extent of the acceptance level by local customers toward Thai food and any changes in customers’ eating of local cuisine
- to compare the respondent’s views based on marital status.
- to examine which food is internationally accepted out of Malay and Thai food.

INSTRUMENT

The survey questionnaire was developed to obtain the information related to research objectives. The instrument was divided into three major sections. Each section contains questions addressing the variables to suit the research objectives. The first section (A) is designed using nominal scales and focuses on respondents’ demographic profiles. Items relating to gender and marital status are asked in this section. Section B consists of items assessing respondents’ acceptance level of Thai food. Respondents are asked to report their views on a five type Likert scale ranging from 1 with “totally disagree” to 5 “totally agree”. Four open ended questions asking respondents to write short answers about their feelings about Thai food are created in Section C. This section is expected to provide greater insight into why respondents choose particular restaurants. Small open ended questions were created to solicit customers’ opinions on the importance of service in restaurant operations. To check the clarity, the proper use of terms and the meaning and relevance of each statement, a pilot test was conducted before the actual survey.

Data Collection Process

As this study sets out to provide the foundation for other future studies of such a nature, restaurant customers in Shah Alam area were selected as a sample. However, due to a large number of restaurants in this area, only those serving Thai food were chosen for this study. Prior to this decision, a preliminary survey looking at the restaurants' profiles based on information gathered from Majlis Bandaraya Shah Alam (MBSA) was carried out in Section 2 to Section 19 in the city of Shah Alam. The number that meets the criteria is around twenty (20) restaurants. 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. Subsequent to this decision, the survey was administered during lunch and dinnertime by the researchers and research assistants at the selected restaurants. Restaurant patrons were approached and requested to complete the survey and were informed that their individual responses were anonymous and confidential. Surveys were conducted every weekend in the month of December 2006. A total of 400 usable questionnaires were obtained for data analysis. The data were tested for reliability using the Cronbach alpha procedure. The alpha coefficient value of .763 indicates reliable measures of the construct for each of the items. .

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Before looking into the specific responses to each item, frequencies related to gender, marital status and regularity of taking Thai food among the respondents were computed. The result showed that the number of males exceeded female respondents with 65.0 per cent against 35.0 per cent. A total of 35.3 percent of respondents were married while 64.8 percent were single. The higher proportion of single bachelors was expected as this group is believed to patronize restaurants more than married men. In terms of regularity of taking Thai food, 12.5 percent reported they had it more than three times a month, 44.3 per cent had it twice a month, 37.8 per cent had it once a month and 5.5 percent had it every week. It appears that people in the Shah Alam area are only taking Thai food as an option rather than being attached to it at all times.

Overall Responses

To examine the acceptance level by local customers of Thai food and any changes in customers eating local cuisine, the descriptive statistic looking at the mean scores of the all items was employed. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 3 Showing the mean scores an levels of agreement of respondents' general attitudes about Thai food

Totally Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Slightly Agree 3	Agree 4	Strongly agree 5
Items	n	Mean	S.D	
Thai food has a better taste than local food	400	1.75	.671	
Thai food is only suitable to be eaten in a specific meal	400	4.24	.684	
More people in this country now go for Thai food	400	3.21	.960	
Only a few Thai foods are popular in this country	400	3.73	.836	
I will be always taking Thai food	400	2.23	1.01	
Thai food can be served at any time	400	2.23	1.10	
I think Thai food is more popular than local food	400	1.35	.478	
Thai food is an alternative for me	400	3.17	.951	
Despite liking Thai food the local food is still my first choice	400	4.50	.552	
I take Thai food occasionally	400	4.58	.950	
I believe Thai food is internationally popular than the local food	400	4.83	.373	
Thai food is only suitable for cooking to order	400	3.80	.684	
I take Thai food because I am bored with the local food	400	1.39	.489	
Thai food is easier to prepare than most of the local food	400	3.60	.992	
Thai food is similar to the Chinese food	400	3.50	.804	
I believe Thai food is much more popular than western food in this country	400	1.78	.702	
Thai food suits all appetites	400	3.49	.656	
Thai food has more varieties compared to the local food	400	2.07	.672	
Despite the price being a little bit higher I still like Thai food	400	2.97	1.01	
Thai food is only suitable to be served hot	400	4.09	.740	
I only take Thai food at dinner time	400	4.19	2.56	
I will take almost any type of Thai food as long as it is halal	400	3.70	1.15	
Thai food is well accepted by the local people	400	4.31	.632	

Looking at the table, respondents clearly reported themselves as somewhat disagreeing that Thai food provides overall better taste than the local food (1.75) and they took Thai food because they were bored with the local food (1.39). They also tended to disagree that Thai foods were more popular than local (1.35) and western food (1.78). 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 (4.24), believing only a few Thai foods are popular in this country (3.73) therefore they take this food as an alternative (3.17). This notion is supported as they somewhat disagreed that they would always take Thai food (2.23), they were less sure that this food can be served at any time (2.23) and disagreed that Thai food has more variety compared to the local food (2.07).

A similar pattern of views occurred on a few items. For instance, respondents clearly expressed themselves as taking Thai food occasionally (4.83). They indeed believed that Thai food is simple to prepare (3.60), only suitable to be served hot (4.09), at dinner time (4.19), as cook to order food (3.80), and similar to Chinese food (3.50). 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 favour of the local food compared to Thai food. This notion is probably best explained by the mean of 4.50 given by the respondents to the item “despite liking Thai food the local food is still my first choice”.

Nevertheless, despite those views, it is interesting to note that respondents implicitly agreed that more people in this country now go for Thai food (3.21) and Thai food is well accepted by the local people (4.31). Not only do the respondents highly believe that Thai food suits all appetites (3.49) and therefore they will take almost any type of Thai food as long as it is halal (3.70) and are willing to eat this food despite the price being a little bit higher (2.97). 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 4.83 was the highest rating 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.

Comparison Based on Marital Status

It was envisaged that when marital status was used in the instrument, there would be a greater likelihood of the single bachelor preferring Thai food compared to those married as they are believed to patronize restaurants more than the married men. Given this, the Independent t- test procedure was utilized to identify if there were any statistically significant differences between those responses. Table 2 reports the results from this analysis highlighting the items for which statistically significant differences were identified.

Table 3 Showing mean scores for items of data collection analyzed by comparing respondents' marital status with t-test result and level of significance

Items	n	Marital status	Mean	S.D	t- value	sig 2-tail
More peoples in this country now go for Thai food	258	Single	3.56	.813	-5.701	.000
	141	Married	3.01	.980		
Only a few Thai foods are popular in this country	258	Single	3.84	.786	-2.023	.040
	141	Married	3.67	.860		
Thai food is an alternative for me	258	Single	3.03	.888	-4.115	.000
	141	Married	3.53	1.09		
Thai food suits all appetites	258	Single	3.75	.745	-6.268	.000
	141	Married	3.24	.552		
Thai food has more varieties compared to the local food	258	Single	1.89	.672	4.113	.000
	141	Married	2.17	.718		
Thai food is only suitable to be served hot	258	Single	4.29	.448	-3.780	.000
	141	Married	3.78	.842		
I will take almost any types of Thai food as long as it is halal	258	Single	3.81	1.06	2.502	.013
	141	Married	3.57	1.27		

Note: 1. Levels of significance are at $p < 0.05$; $p < 0.01$ and $p < 0.001$
 2. Statistically significant differences between group in “ Sig 2- tail” are **bolded**.
 3. Scale 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly agree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Inspection of the table reveals that out of twenty three items only seven showed statistically significant differences between single bachelor respondents and married respondents as to how they view Thai food. As such, single bachelor respondents more strongly believed (3.56, $p = .000$) than the married respondents (3.13) that many local people now like Thai food. They were more in agreement (3.75, $p = .000$) that Thai food suits all appetites (3.24) and they will take almost any type of Thai food as long as it is halal (3.81 $p = .013$ compared to 3.57 responses given by married respondents). Despite accepting the fact that Thai food has a new impact on the local people, single bachelor respondents also recorded a greater belief than the married that only a few Thai foods are becoming popular in this country (3.84, $p = .040$ compared to 3.67) and they only suitable to be served hot (4.29, $p = .000$ compared to 3.78) and disagreed that the Thai

food has more varieties compared to the local food (1.89, $p = .000$ compared to 2.17). The married respondents, on the other hand, more strongly believed than the single bachelor respondents that Thai food was only as an alternative for them (3.53, $p = .000$ compared to 3.03).

In sum, despite the statistically significant differences, in absolute terms both groups were consistent in their views towards those items. This can clearly be seen from the magnitude of the mean scores. This suggests that both groups of respondents have similar perceptions toward Thai food in this country. Therefore, the differences through the higher rating given by single bachelor respondents compared to married respondents are possibly due to the regularity of taking Thai food by this group.

Open ended Response

As previously mentioned, five open ended questions were included in the instrument. The intention was to identify how the respondents openly perceived the Thai food. The first question asked the respondent, '*What are the most popular Thai foods in Malaysia?*'. The results revealed that almost all the respondents stated that Tom Yam, Padphrik, Nam phrhrik and nasi goreng Pattaya were the most popular Thai dishes in this country. In actual fact, this is not surprising as most of the restaurants in this country, without doubt, sell these two dishes in their premises. This result on the other hand indicates that the majority of the respondents are more familiar with these two Thai dishes and probably have got used to them.

In the second question, respondents were asked, '*What is your opinion of the taste of Thai food?*' Overall, respondents were quite impressed with the spicy, sweet and sour taste of the Thai dishes. Some of the verbatim answers given are:

I like taste of sweet, sour and spiciness of Thai food
Thai food is spicy with a good taste
Spicy, hot, sweet and sour; that is Thai food

However, some stated that Thai foods are good to be eaten while still hot. This notion fits with the high mean ratings given by respondents to the item, "Thai food is only suitable to be served hot" in the quantitative questions. These statements also uphold the argument that Thai dishes are suitable to be served as cook to order food.

Respondents were also asked a question, "*Do you think Thai food outshines the local food. Why?*" The following quotations demonstrate some of the range of individual responses:

No, among the locals they take Thai as an alternative. They still prefer the Malaysia food.
No, Malaysian people still love their home cooking
No, people take Thai sometimes but not all the time.

These comments suggest that despite the allure of Thai food the majority of respondents still adored Malaysian food as their first preference. This was in line with the higher ratings they gave to the items, ‘ Despite liking Thai food the local food is still my first choice’ in overall responses analysis.

The last open ended question asked, ‘Which of these two cuisines (Thai and Malaysian) are internationally popular. Why?’ The responses are typified by the following verbatim quotes:

Probably Thai food, there are increasing number of restaurants in this country selling this food

Thai food, they market their food through international tourists

Great promotions throughout the world make Thai food more popular

The large number of tourists visiting Thailand makes their food internationally more popular than ours

As can be seen, answers are given by the respondents in similar patterns. Whether respondents have strong evidence to support their views is not known. However, these notions fit the quantitative results. Respondents somewhat agreed with the items ‘ I believe Thai food are internationally more popular than the local food’. This result may suggest that some respondents, through reading, mass media and other means, recognized that Thai food is internationally well known compared to Malaysian food.

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study highlighted a range of interesting and significant findings. One of the notable findings is that respondents saw a number of Thai foods as trendy and well accepted in this country. The spiciness, sweet and sour and pungency of the dishes seem to blend well with the local taste. Respondents claimed they were familiar with some of the Thai dishes here and young single bachelors in particular more frequently eat Thai food than the married group. 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 more popular and

internationally accepted than Malaysian food. This result in fact is in line with the result of the survey undertaken by the Kellogg School of Management and Sasin 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's 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 2008 (Tsui, 2006)

The above indicators have provided significant implications for 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 than a mixture of Malay, Chinese, Indian and Eurasian. In fact, to most of the international tourists Malaysia is known as a food heaven. As of now, there are fewer than 1000 Malaysian restaurants overseas (EPU, 2006) and many of them often appear under the big umbrella of Asian food, or Malaysian food with an ethnic prefix. In addition, many complain that Malaysian eateries are scarce abroad and foreigners are more familiar with dishes from other Asian nations.

Realizing this, the government of Malaysia through the Economy Planning Unit (EPU) introduced a project called "Malaysia Kitchen" at the end of 2006 to increase the number of Malaysian restaurants all over the globe. The Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Dato Seri Mohd Najib Razak has announced that the government would offer financial incentives such as cheap loans and tax breaks to entrepreneurs who wanted to open Malaysian restaurants abroad. One hundred and fifty million (RM 150 million) have been pumped into its Export-Import Bank for this project. The *modus operandi* of this project was not very different from Thailand's 'Kitchen of the World' initiative. In promoting Malaysian food internationally, the government prioritizes standardization and quality. One of the government's procedures to control the standard of Malaysian restaurants overseas is the use of uniform menus. Dishes such as rendang, satay, nasi lemak, mee goreng, teh tarik a few more are identified as compulsory items. Malaysian embassies and

the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (Matrade) offices abroad will act as advisers and guides for restaurateurs. From such promotional ventures, it not only generates foreign income through sales of food and service overseas but also benefits the food suppliers and other Malaysia industries, particularly in the halal food products which are an expanding market, as well as the agricultural products which are also one of Malaysia's leading exports.

As a conclusion, despite significant insights, this study faces some limitations that are inherent in the research method. One of the primary limitations of this study results from the lack of secondary data from similar studies in literature. Another limitation pertains to the sampling method. Owing to budget constraints information had to be collected only from restaurants in the Shah Alam area rather than the whole country. As a consequence, findings had to be confined and interpreted within the characteristics of the sample used. Therefore, this present study underscores the need for further investigation on this topic in a broader scope.

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