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FROM MARCO POLO TO MCDONALD'S: THAI CUISINE IN TRANSITION

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Southeast Asia is finally receiving the attention it deserves as the home of an exquisite culinary tradition. While ingredients such as lemon grass, ginger, and fermented fish sauce are ubiquitous throughout much of Southeast Asia, there are distinct regional traditions as well. Some of these traditions are rising to the status of national cuisines with national dishes. Spearheading the increased popularity of Southeast Asian cuisines is the discovery of Thai food as a significant international cuisine, popularized through tourism and Thai restaurants in North America and Europe. (The Thai, of course, never doubted for a moment the superiority of their food!) The cover of “the first complete authentic Thai cookbook published in America” promotes Thai food: “Healthful and slimming, this is the newest exotic cuisine sweeping the country” (Brennan 1981). However, the study of Thai cuisine is in its infancy with no substantial documents in Thai or English presenting hypotheses to review or refute. Because the process of constructing Thai food as a national and international cuisine is particularly visible now, this is an opportune moment to review some of the processes underlying the construction of Thai cuisine in Thailand and to a lesser degree, abroad.

Thai food has been one of the greatest pleasures of twenty years of involvement with Thailand. Regardless of the focus of my field research, I find my journals are always filled with comments on food and meals, as if food were the means through which I came to make sense of Thai social interaction. In addition to observing and enjoyably participating in the preparation and consumption of Thai meals (primarily in Bangkok, Khon Kaen, Chiang Mai, and Suphanburi province), I have drawn evidence from a review of Thai cookbooks and from library research. Thai students, professors, and chefs whom I informally interviewed confirmed and corrected impressions gained from the above sources. My past work related to Thai food concentrated on the symbolic meaning of specific foods such as rice and milk (Van Esterik 1984), the use of foods in Buddhist ritual (Van Esterik 1988), and infant feeding practices (1989). While these papers raised questions about nurturance, the meaning of food to Thai identity, and the role of food sharing in main-

taining social relations, they did not situate food in a broad historical and cultural context. A complete in-depth examination of the Thai food system would include the analysis of food production, food processing, the social and symbolic meaning of meals and eating, and the nutritional consequences of food intake. This is clearly impossible to accomplish in a single paper. Instead, this paper focuses on Thai cuisine—the products of the kitchens of royalty and peasant, past and present—and asks some preliminary questions about how Thai cuisine has emerged out of the historical, hierarchical, seasonal, and regional variations in meals. The paper begins with a historical overview of Thai cuisine and examines several themes that may prove useful for the future analysis of Thai cuisine including the relation between palace and village food and the processes influencing the development of a national cuisine.

HISTORICAL CLUES

Just as Thai culture is often described as a blend of Indian and Chinese influences, so, much of the Thai food system is described in terms of Indian “curries” and Chinese “noodles,” with minimal attention paid to the indigenous and unique Thai taste. While it is important to examine the indigenous base, the Thai have always been extraordinarily receptive to all things foreign. Both themes can be seen in the following overview of the history of Thai cuisine. It is easy to overlook the important evidence of historical and cultural relationships established through food and taste preference, since there are very few historical documents relating to Thai food. The clues are few but provocative. Perhaps the earliest evidence on indigenous cuisine comes from Marco Polo when he was in Yunnan near Nanchao. In his travel accounts written in 1298, he described a unique dish that may be one of the earliest Thai specialties. “For the poor men go to the butchery and take and buy the raw liver as soon as it is drawn out of the animal and chop it small. And then he puts it in salt and in garlic sauce made with hot water and spices and eats it immediately” (Moule and Pelliot 1938: 277–278). The Thai dish, *laab*, can be made from minced raw liver, pork, beef, buffalo, or chicken with blood and bile, mixed with garlic, black pepper, coriander root, chili peppers, mint, and dry ground rice. It is an important part of Lao, Shan, and Thai diets, and is found in a similar form in Bali and Timor (Riks 1987). *Laab* is a popular item on Bangkok menus in its transformed state: cook the meat and omit the bile and blood. Perhaps the earliest manifestation of what has come to be known as the Thai taste dates from this time period—the combination of black pepper, garlic, and coriander root.

Thai food staples, rice and fish, were already immortalized as a metaphor of prosperity and security in the famous Ramkhamhaeng inscription of 1292 in the kingdom of Sukhothai: “In the water there are fish; in the fields there is rice.” As the kingdom of Ayutthaya (1350–1768) set about distinguishing itself from its more egalitarian predecessor, Sukhothai, and elaborating its court and palace culture, the Thai culinary base began the process of transformation so visible in the following Bangkok period—the differentiation of palace and peasant food. For example, after the Thai occupation of Angkor Wat (1431), Khmer cooks were brought back

to Ayutthaya with them. These cooks may well have introduced Indian curries and desserts to the Ayutthaya court. Indian desserts such as boiled red and white sweets are found today as part of the royal-style system of foods for rituals such as weddings (see Van Esterik 1980). When the Persians visited Ayutthaya and the court of King Narai in the 1680s, they described in the markets a range of meat, lizards, and snakes, and noted that people of all classes made fish and rice their mainstay (O'Kane 1972: 157). But these Persian traders were less than enamored with Thai cuisine: "The food of the Siamese . . . in no way resembles normal, proper foods and the natives are not familiar with intelligent methods of preparing meals. In fact, no one in Siam really knows how to cook and eat or even how to sit correctly at the table." But King Narai managed to produce a Persian banquet for his guests, and, according to the Persians, acquired a "permanent taste for our food" (O'Kane 1972: 68). However, it seems King Narai did not eat with his Persian guests, according to them because he was "not practiced in our table manners"; more likely, he preferred to eat his own food. In this period, Lady Vichayen was given a high honorific title as head of the royal kitchen for introducing *Kanom Thong Yip* (golden-threads dessert), a confection of eggs and sugar modified from a French or Portuguese dish, to King Narai.

After the founding of Bangkok in 1782, foreign items, recipes, and meal formats continued to be adopted in the palace. For example, John Bowring, visiting Bangkok in 1855, asked the king's brother to prepare a "genuine Siamese repast." He writes:

On arriving, we found the table spread in the accustomed and approved European-Oriental style, with an abundance of plate, glasses, wines, soups, fish, roasted and boiled meat, hors d'oeuvres, with a variety of pastry, jellies, etc.; but, apart, the Prince had provided what he called a Siamese dinner for one, and I imagine the succession of dishes could have been scarcely less than sixty or seventy. He said he wished to gratify my curiosity, but that courtesy requires him to entertain me according to the usages of my country, and not of Siam. (Bowring 1977: 109)

Adopting the dishes of foreigners was considered a polite and civilized thing to do in the Thai courts. Many of the nineteenth-century visitors to Thailand failed to appreciate Thai life because they measured civilization so differently from the Thai. As Terweil writes:

Civilization was measured, not in broad, clean streets or in impressive stone buildings, but in knowledge of etiquette, in a dignified posture, in polished speech, and in a variety of other subtle signs imbedded in Thai culture. Comforts of life, in Siamese terms, were to be found in a pillow against which to lean, in being able to enjoy the rich cuisine, in the mild stimulus of chewing betel, in the appreciation of a dancer's movement, or the sound of an orchestra. (1989: 43)

A civilized city was prosperous and well fed. The 1789 *Chronicle of Buddhist Councils* describes Rama I's capital, Bangkok, as a city where people experience pleasure and contentment, where food was abundant, and monks could study free from anxiety about finding their next meal (Reynolds 1979: 98). Certainly the two

thousand monks invited by King Rama I to take part in the dedication of the Emerald Buddha in 1809 were well fed:

His Majesty has been pleased to invite members of the Royal Family and gentlemen of the Court to take part in providing food for the clergy, to consist of cooked rice, accompanied by sausages, duck eggs, *kai p'anaeng* (devilled capon), fried prawns and pork, fried eggplant, omelettes, quenelles, prawn broth, bamboo shoots, *namprik*, *plaaheeng phad*, and watermelon with the following sweets, *Khanom foy*, crystallized rice, *khanom phing*; "chicken entrails" (fried batter dipped in molasses), banana chips, *sankhyaa* (custard cooked in a coconut shell), golden shreds (a sort of oeufs filés) and *khanom talai*. Also, court attendants are to fetch from Her Excellency of the Inner Palace, *kengron* (a soup of Chinese origin) and from the Moslem officials of the Harbour Department portions of Indian rice and curry, in supplement of the regular menus, etc. (Sonakul 1952: e)

As in Sukhothai, the abundance of food was an important measure of a successful Thai kingdom. Features of palace food were glorified and codified in the poems written by King Rama II (1809–1824) and King Rama VI (1910–1925). In the boat song poems of Rama II, various palace food dishes are compared to women:

Any man who tastes this hot
and spicy curry will dream of
the beautiful lady who prepared it.

This shrimp salad
has a delicious dressing.
But its ecstatic taste cannot
even be compared to one's sweetheart.

These two kinds of dessert,
the "egg dropped sweet"
and the "rolled wafer"
make me think of our secret:
the two years we spent together.

The dessert, the "sweet egg thread"
reminds me of you, sewing with
fine golden Chinese silk yarns.
(Krairiksh 1985: 47–51)

King Rama VI followed up on these poems by writing about Thai snacks and light meals and encouraging Thai women to be accomplished in the culinary arts (Na Songkla n.d.: Introduction).

The rituals elaborated around palace food were clearly of Indian origin and included practical precautions against poisoning. For example, no one could enter the palace kitchen when food was being prepared and the plates were sealed until the king broke the seal. Writing during the reign of Rama VI (1910–1925), Quar-

itch Wales noted that "Siamese kings formerly respected the Indian ideas of defilement and used leaf-platters which are now only used in ritual" (1931: 37).

These practical rules to regulate royal eating were not like the regulative eating rules established as the basis of the Hindu caste system. Such rules could not take root in the essential Thai approach to food: pleasure in its preparation and consumption and easy adoption of new items and recipes, transformed to fit with cultural rules of meal format and taste preferences.

Market Food

But palaces were not the only sources of inspiration for Thai cuisine. The tradition of Bangkok market food in which a single family specializes in one or two recipes is an important source of innovation in the development of Thai cuisine. Thirty years ago, one market area collected a number of food vendors together and operated all night. Pratunam became the place to visit after movies or late-night entertainment. Other spots such as the end of *soi* 38 on Sukhumvit began with one pushcart selling rice porridge, then added hawkers selling coffee, noodles and red pork, and other special dishes. Night food stalls selling Thai specialties were also located near temples throughout Bangkok. Market vendors' food has always been highly (but quietly) valued in urban Thai society. Wealthy business people know the best stall in an open market for purchasing fresh noodles for lunch. (I remember eating at a duck noodle restaurant on Sukhumvit and seeing a silver Jaguar pull up in the bus lane in front of the restaurant: a woman in a silk suit stepped out with a silver lunch pail, purchased several servings of duck noodle soup, and returned to her car after holding up a line of honking buses). More often, servants or lower-rank workers purchase market food from market vendors and bring the food into offices. Vendors with particularly flavorful dishes are well known to their customers. As one Thai chef expressed it, "We are lucky, in that fine cuisine in our country is not just the prerogative of the rich" (Bhumichitr 1988: 75).

Noodle dishes, snacks, and other market foods were very mobile in Bangkok. Market foods were brought directly to the homes of the wealthy as well as of the middle class and poor, by peddlers who sold their dishes up and down the lanes and canals of Bangkok. Push-cart vendors gathered near schools to sell meals and snacks to children. In the sixties, Thai department stores featured food pavilions where Thai and foreign foods could be purchased to take home or consume on the spot. Currently, the market tradition takes an even more significant place in national cuisine through the incorporation of small market vendors into huge food parks (*suan ahaan*) in shopping malls, night markets, and hotel complexes.

The small market stalls offer only wooden stools, small linoleum tables, and stark walls; food is exposed to the heat, pollution, and flies of a crowded market. Nevertheless, there is now public recognition of the importance of the market food tradition in the construction of Thai cuisine. The *Shell Good Food Guide*, providing ratings for recommended restaurants, includes market stalls in its award tours, acknowledging that they serve outstanding Thai food but with little consideration to decor or cleanliness.

Restaurants

Until about forty years ago, the choice of restaurants in Bangkok included a few luxurious Chinese restaurants and three hotel restaurants serving western foods (the Oriental, Trocadero, and Europa). Thai food was available only around the edges of open markets. Small restaurants selling some Chinese dishes and some western dishes were known by the term “cookshop” (written in Thai script) (Xoom-sai n.d.: 161). After World War II, two kinds of small shops appeared, often operating side by side, the Chinese noodle shop and the Thai curry shop also selling *kanom chin* (a rice noodle). The *Shell Good Food Guide* includes the former but not the latter in its evaluations. These small-scale family-owned businesses continue to prosper because of the loyalty of their clientele and their new role as provisioners for employed “plastic-bag housewives” who pick up prepared curries, red pork, and other side dishes on their way home from work to serve with rice at the evening meal.

In the last ten years, the number of standard restaurants serving traditional Thai food has increased dramatically. The *Bangkok Restaurant Guide* (1988) identifies 125 Thai restaurants, as opposed to Chinese or western restaurants. Most serve a combination of royal- and village-style dishes. Two well-known Bangkok chefs identified Jit Pochana restaurant as the first “real” Thai restaurant in Bangkok. The restaurant grew out of the market tradition, with the owner selling her specialty (spicy fish cakes, *tod man*) in markets, until the family was able to open a restaurant in the early sixties. Several Thai chefs identified Jit Pochana as serving good *ahaan chao baan* (village food), unlike nearby Sorn Daeng restaurant which served *ahaan chao wang* (palace food).

Regional Foods

The dominance of Bangkok and the gradual expansion of state control over more distant regions is reflected in the structure of Thai cuisine. Although there were distinct differences between the regional specialties of the north, south, and northeast, they were all considered peasant food and were ignored or disparaged in the court centers. Sour chili-filled sausages from the north or satow beans from the south would be brought back from trips to those regions.

Inevitably, modern communications and the movement of peoples into the capital has meant a blurring of our regional differences. Once, a visit to the north meant the chance to sample a whole new cuisine, now it is more the opportunity to savour the best of a style of cooking one is already familiar with. (Bhumichitr 1988: 131)

Regional cuisines were subordinated to the central Thai Bangkok cuisine until recently when international tourism and migration encouraged the proliferation of places providing regional foods in Bangkok. Northeastern or Lao food is the best example of this process. In the 1950s and 1960s glutinous rice, roast chicken, *laab*, *somtam* (papaya salad), and other Lao favorites were available in Bangkok only

around the boxing stadium where northeastern boxers and fans gathered to eat and drink before and after boxing matches. Lao food could also be found outside construction sites in mobile food carts providing construction workers from the northeast with their regional foods and beside gas stations serving long-distance bus drivers.

The recent development of a Bangkok franchise of clean, air-conditioned restaurants selling northeastern food, Isan Classic, provides sanitized but, according to many, bastardized Lao food. Although these restaurants are clean, pleasant places to sit and eat, the more authentic northeastern food is still available behind the boxing stadium and by construction sites around Bangkok. In attempting to include northeastern food in a standardized national cuisine, middle-class Bangkok selected and modified the taste of a few dishes—grilled chicken, *somtam*, *laab*—by reducing the chili peppers and increasing the sugar, and ignored other dishes such as fermented fish and insects.

International Food Exchanges

In the 1980s tourism exposed millions of visitors to Thai food. This process has spawned transformations that may eventually reflect back on the structure of the Thai food system. The first is the invention of an interesting cultural hybrid, special Thai food for tourists modified to appeal to presumptions about Euramerican tastes. The second is the proliferation of Thai and pseudo-Thai restaurants in Europe and North America. Some restaurants serve a very bland version of Thai food and others make “no lazy concessions to some mythical notion of Western taste” (Bhumichitr 1988: 14). There are over two hundred Thai restaurants in Los Angeles alone. These restaurants began as sources of local food for Thai immigrants to London, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. The tourist promotion of Thailand as a gourmet paradise has also encouraged the marketing of Thai processed foods for the North American market. Home Gourmet offers packets of ingredients to produce a five-course gourmet Thai dinner modelled after the palace meal format.

At the same time, in Thailand the availability of western foods and western restaurants has increased dramatically, offering different options for Thai and foreign consumers. McDonald's took its time determining its locale and guaranteeing that its production standards could be maintained in Bangkok. They signed a Bangkok contract in 1983 after six years of carefully watching the fast-food market (McKinney 1983: 32). Western chains such as A & W, Shakeys, Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Dunkin Donuts have succeeded in Bangkok while Thai versions of western fast-food chains have largely failed (Hoburger is the largest surviving Thai chain). The fast-food outlets cater to Thai teenagers who make up 70 percent of the customers (McKinney 1983: 41); however, they may sit for three hours in an air-conditioned McDonald's and purchase one Coke. As Bhumichitr says of western fast-foods, “happily, these are treated more like exotic oddities than as substitutes for our own diet, probably because Thailand is already the home of fast food” (1988: 74–75).

HIGH AND LOW CUISINE

What analytical questions does this overview of Thai cuisine raise? In 1982, Goody explored the conditions for the emergence of cuisines in Europe, Asia, and Africa. His work raises questions about the development of a high cuisine (discussed here as palace food, *ahaan chow wang*) and a low cuisine (village food, *ahaan chow baan*) in Thailand. From the historical overview it is clear that Thailand meets Goody's conditions for societies with strongly differentiated cuisines: intensive (rice) agriculture and texts that elaborate ideas about food (in this case, in the context of medicinal recipes—see *Tamraa phra osot Phra Narai*, medical texts of King Narai, presented around 1660; *Phaetthayasaat Songkhroh*, royal texts compiled in 1871).

In this section, I argue that Thailand has a moderately differentiated cuisine, not an undifferentiated cuisine as Goody describes for Africa, nor a highly elaborated cuisine as he describes for Eurasian food systems. The more interesting questions regarding Thai cuisine concern the connections between the high and low cuisines. As in other cuisines, differentiation between palace and village food was maintained through unequal access to resources: food, cash, exotic ingredients, time and skills to produce certain dishes. But in Thailand, the differences were also emphasized by the use of serving dishes indicative of differences in rank, the number of different side dishes served, and the presentation of food in a transformed state, decorated to disguise its natural form. Although individual differences in rank were characteristic of Thai society, they were not marked by differential access to or allocation of specific foods. If you could obtain elite foods you could eat them.

Dishes prepared for the king and royal family and identified as *ahaan chao wang* (palace food) were notable primarily by their elaborate decoration and attention to details of preparation. For example, effort was made to obtain the freshest foods, wash them repeatedly and thoroughly, cut them carefully into smaller and more regularly sized pieces so that the flavors would enter the food more easily, and remove all peel or seeds to make the dishes more convenient to eat. But the dishes themselves—the taste combinations—were standard Thai recipes, available to a wealthy villager who could obtain the ingredients. As late as the nineteenth century, Pallegoix observed that “the princes and the king differed from their subjects by the richness of their table service and the variety of their dishes” (Reid 1988: 41).

One striking feature of the palace food system was the transformation of food to look like something else. Fruit and vegetables were carved into flowers; sweets were molded to look like fruits and vegetables; a spicy fish mixture was molded and steamed in the shape of tiny fish “swimming” on lettuce leaves (Solomon 1985: 293). The Bangkok court still has a royal carver, a hereditary post filled by a craftsman skilled in vegetable and fruit carving (Bhumichitr 1988: 153). *Luk Choob* are tiny sweets made of mung-bean paste molded into tiny fruit and vegetables, “painted” with fruit and vegetable dyes, and glazed with agar-agar. In the early seventies, this dessert was rarely seen. Since the tiny sweets are so delicate, time-consuming, and difficult to make, I assumed that few people had the skill or patience to make them any more. Once served only to the royal household, they

have recently appeared in Thai supermarkets and food-vending stalls throughout the city.

Palace food was never left in its raw or natural state, but was always transformed into something demonstrating human control. Even fish became miniature replicas of themselves. Rutnin writes, "It is a Thai tradition to improve upon nature with craft. Admiration of craftsmanship overshadows that of nature" (1989: 245). These transformations were incredibly labor intensive and could only be accomplished by the labor of a large number of skilled cooks.

Palace food was the creation of royal servants and royal families. Women trained in the palace schools learned the techniques of creating palace food. Women predominate in food processing today, as one Thai researcher writes, "due to their attention to fine details which is culturally manifested in Thai food preparation, classical dance, flower arrangements, and classical art" (Phithakpol et al. 1982: 50). Many Thai chefs refer to the same configuration of gendered skills. Pinsuvana writes in the introduction to her popular cookbook that she learned from her great aunt "of the House of Kunjara in Bangkok, well known in the Thai Royal Court and to the public as a famous family in the art of cooking, Thai classical dancing, and flower arranging" (Pinsuvana 1976: preface). These arts were probably valued to teach elite women the virtues of calmness, concentration, and control. However, more research needs to be done on cooking and gendered knowledge, since both men and women have reputations as superb cooks and both cook publicly and domestically in certain contexts. The gender implications of the training of elite Thai women in palace cooking cannot be explored here. However, connections between decorative food and women accomplished in the culinary arts were made explicit in the writings on royal Thai cuisine by King Rama II and King Rama VI.

Palace food was not only beautiful in its own right, but it was served on dishes of great value and beauty. Similarly, the boxes for storing the ingredients for betel chewing were carefully graded by rank with gold, silver, and bronze sets used by individuals of different rank. The sumptuary items that King Mongkut (1851–1868) presented to different levels of nobility included offering trays, spittoons, water goblets, teapots, and betel equipment (C. Wilson 1970: 471–72). The serving trays displaying Thai food marked differences in the rank of people who would consume the food. Sumptuary laws in Thailand regulated the use of serving dishes (gold, silver, and so forth); their value was as important a distinction as the food consumed. In contrast, sumptuary laws in England and Europe regulated the consumption of food items. In France, a law of 1563 forbade peasant families to have meals of more than three courses and specified the number of type of dishes in each course (Mennell 1985: 30).

Royal meals were distinguished from peasant meals not by the composition of the dishes, but by the quality of the ingredients and the number of dishes served. Palace food was more refined, harmonious in flavors, sweeter, and more elaborately decorated and served. In the words of a leading Bangkok chef, people who ate palace foods had "weak tongues" and could not eat the stronger, harsher tastes of village foods like *nam prik* (a spicy shrimp paste). Village food was more easily prepared and cooked, less carefully planned since each dish depended on current

availability of vegetables, meat, or fish, and less refined in taste combinations. Dishes were more likely to have the hot taste of chili pepper predominate to stimulate the consumption of large amounts of rice. Palace foods were more likely to balance different flavors into a harmonious blend.

A truly hierarchical cuisine has a great gulf between levels—not simply differences in quantity and quality of food, but substantial differences in ingredients, recipes, meal format, methods of preparation, and flavor principles. I suggest that this is not characteristic of the Thai food system. There are specifiable relations between the food of the palace and the food of the peasant. That is not to say that there are not real differences between the food consumed by a prince in Bangkok and a peasant farmer in central Thailand in the 1850s, or between Bangkok Thai elites and factory laborers today; rather, the differences are of scale and elaboration, not of structure.

The Structure of Thai Cuisine

Rich and poor, royalty and commoner, shared the essentials of Thai cuisine. Rozin defines cuisine as the individual style or expression of universal culinary activity. These culinary activities include selection of edible ingredients, manipulative techniques used to prepare the food, flavor principles, and cultural rules for consuming foods (Rozin 1982: 189–203). Although Thai cuisine constantly adjusts to new conditions and reflects changes in society, the structure of Thai cuisine also shows substantial continuities through time and across income levels.

Glutinous and non-glutinous rice, dried or fresh fish, and locally available vegetables are the most basic ingredients in Thai meals. Garlic, onions, and a wide range of herbs, leaves, and flowers flavor Thai dishes. Coconut for curries and desserts is a common ingredient but not basic to all Thai cooking, particularly in rural communities where coconuts can be sold for cash. Thai dishes use a wide range of meats: beef, pork, chicken, duck, as well as fish, shellfish, insects, and frogs. In deference to Buddhist proscriptions on right livelihoods, there are few Thai butchers, although meat is consumed by good Buddhists and presented in dishes to monks (see Van Esterik 1986). Several kinds of noodles made of mung bean, rice flour, or wheat flour are also important, particularly for lunch and snacks. Thailand is justly famous for its fruits which are consumed fresh, prepared in desserts, or preserved.

Thai cooking requires very little special equipment; rather, there is great emphasis on careful preparation of ingredients before cooking. Basic equipment includes a wok or rounded frying pan, mortar and pestle, steamer, knife, and strainer scoop. Other special equipment for making desserts was developed in Bangkok as part of the complex of palace foods.

There are a number of manipulative techniques used to prepare Thai foods for cooking. These include cutting, grinding, drying, pickling, fermenting, smoking, and mixing. The most common forms of transforming food include steaming and frying, with roasting and boiling less common. Cooking is generally accomplished very quickly, although preparation time may be substantial.

The ingredients selected for cooking palace and peasant dishes often have medicinal properties. The basic taste contrasts of Thai food—sweet, bitter, sour, salty, hot, cool, and fragrant—overlap with the nine medicinal tastes of traditional Thai medicine as derived from the Indian Ayurvedic system (see Mulholland 1979). These taste contrasts guide the combination of ingredients for relishes, side dishes, tonics, and teas and the combination of dishes with rice. These tastes are derived from local herbs, spices, flowers, leaves, resins, oils, and roots. Their aromatic properties are acknowledged to be important to the taste of both foods and medicines. Many of these products are gathered wild in the forests along with wild greens which supplement the diets of the rural poor. The same ingredients found in classic Thai curries are also found in massage balls (*luk prakop*), a spongelike mass of wet or dry herbs used for traditional massage in Bangkok. The ten ingredients used for this unique product include two forms of turmeric, lemon grass, kaffir lime, tamarind, and bitter orange, along with four medicinal products not included in Thai cooking. These same herbs were identified in a Lao “sauna” in Vientiane in 1989. After emerging from the sauna, I noticed how much I smelled like my favorite Thai curry and checked the ingredients. An exhaustive list of products selected for Thai cooking would also require a listing of most of the items collected for traditional Thai medicine, a task beyond the scope of this paper (see Van Esterik 1988).

In spite of the regional variations in Thai food, there is a recognizable Thai taste: the combination of fish sauce, lemon grass, lime, coriander, ginger or galingale, garlic, sweet Thai basil, mint, and chili peppers in a harmonious blend. Soy sauce is of minor importance except in Chinese dishes. Black pepper and ginger are probably among the most ancient flavor combinations as they are basic to culinary and medicinal traditions (Pottier 1975). Thai tastes favor the adoption of irritants such as chili peppers and the inclusion of sour and bitter “medicinal” flavors balanced with cooling greens or coconut milk.

Although Thai food has gained the reputation of being chili-hot, traditional Thai cuisine is characterized by a blending of flavors to produce a taste harmony. Chili peppers should not predominate. In fact, they dominate in many dishes in rural areas to stimulate the consumption of rice. Chili peppers were a late addition to Thai cuisine, as they were introduced from South America in the sixteenth century. However, they soon became the most widespread “hot” ingredient in Thai recipes.

The blending of herbs and spices provides the essential Thai taste. Thus, the taste of a dish does not arise from the essential natural juices of meat, fish or chicken, as in western dishes, but from the combination of herbs and spices flavoring the dish. This is true of both peasant and palace cuisine.

EMERGENCE OF A NATIONAL CUISINE

The development of national cuisines, as well as their representation internationally, is part of postcolonial, postindustrial efforts to create overarching, standardized national cultures from regional and ethnic diversity (see Appadurai 1988). Although Thailand was never colonized, its rulers have had to promote national

identity and unity throughout the last century. While King Rama VI promoted a style of elite nationalism, Prime Ministers Phibun Songkhram (1938–1944, 1948–1963), and Sarit Thanarat (1959–1963) developed forms of mass nationalism (Wyatt 1982). It is possible that this mass nationalism included an appreciation of the unique qualities of Thai cuisine. Certainly the National Identity Board in the prime minister's office is aware of the importance of food to Thai identity, as the preface to its publication, *Thai Cuisine* (Punyasingh 1986: Preface) indicates:

Thai culinary art has for centuries been regarded as the quintessence of our cultural heritage. However, there hardly exist any recorded past recipes and the complex art was jealously guarded and handed down like a family heirloom to the select few. The first known collection of recipes in print appeared after World War I and even then, it was not widely circulated.

In the last two decades, the unique flavor of Thai food, a happy harmonious blend of fresh herbs and aromatic spices, has been gaining increasing popularity with diners all over the world and has firmly established itself alongside other world-famous cuisines.

Regional and class differences can be a threat to national unity, or they can be controlled and commoditized through a variety of means. I have suggested that northeastern food has recently been redefined in this way. Attempts to define regional cuisines as part of a single national cuisine are obvious in the food parks of Bangkok where stalls selling northeastern, northern, and southern specialties are featured often with women wearing regional dress. *Thai Cuisine* features regional dishes, with three from the north, four from the northeast, and one from the south. As these regions were drawn more directly into the control of the central government, so, too, their food—a key symbol of their distinct identities—was merged into the national cuisine and consumed at the center of the kingdom, Bangkok.

Thai food has emerged as a significant international cuisine in the last decade. I argue that it is constructed from upgrading the market tradition, co-opting regional traditions, and popularizing or democratizing the royal cuisine. The production of texts over the last fifty years has encouraged the latter. Two kinds of texts deserve mention and additional examination in order to understand the development of a national Thai cuisine.

The palace cooks and royal relatives who were trained in the methods of palace cooking and the fine arts of carving and decorating food were not at all willing to share their expertise. They were *huangwicha* or protective of their knowledge of *ahaan chao wang*, according to one famous Thai chef. After the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, the financial security of the aristocracy declined along with the royal rank of each generation, and royalty gradually joined the ranks of commoners, thus moving specialist knowledge a little more broadly into Bangkok society. Families such as Xoomsai, Bunnak, Amatayakul, and Sanitwong, who were trained in the palace, have shared their knowledge of the royal kitchen in a number of ways. Many members of the nobility set up restaurants. Others turned to the production of culinary texts.

Cremation Books

One mechanism for bringing palace cooking to a broader audience was the publication of cremation books containing recipes. Cremation books are published as memorials to the deceased and distributed to those attending cremation and memorial ceremonies. Children often publish books for their deceased parents, but a well-to-do sponsor may also cover the costs of publication. Books are also published on the occasion of birthdays and anniversaries. Cremation and memorial services are occasions for careful display of rank. High-ranking families would have the opportunity to collect a large number of cremation books from families of similar rank. However, until the library of cremation books at Wat Bovornives opened in 1972, the collection was not available to the general public (see Olson n.d.). One of the most famous of Bangkok chefs, Khun Chalee Amatayakul, developed some of the recipes he used for his cooking school at the Oriental Hotel and his restaurant, Sala Rim Nam, from his study of cremation books, including those of his relatives.

A survey of the cremation books in the library of Wat Bovornives reveals that this was another route for royal-style food to become more widely known out of the palace. The collections in the library represent a sample of cremation books rather than the total universe. Within this sample, there are a substantial number of books that reproduce the favorite recipes of the deceased or a personal collection of recipes from a variety of sources. In the library collection, 108 cremation books were recipe collections of one sort or another. The earliest cremation book of recipes was completed in 1933 and contained recipes for village food and palace food. The last cremation books in the library collection as of 1984 featured western food, particularly the adaptation of French recipes. The greatest concentration of recipe books occurred in the years 1960 to 1975. In these years, 87 recipe cremation books (80 percent of the library's recipe books) were deposited in the library. The recipes are mostly described as "local" Thai recipes, family recipes, and village Thai recipes, but at least twelve books reproduce palace recipes (*ahaan chao wang*). In addition, there are translations of recipes from western cookbooks and Indian, Malaysian, Indonesian, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, and vegetarian recipes. Many of the authors, sponsors, or persons memorialized have royal ranks (*Mom chao*, *Mom ratchawong*, *Mom luang*) or honorary titles such as *Khunying*. It is particularly interesting to see the large number of cremation books containing recipes in the sixties because this time period also saw the development of the first permanent Thai restaurants in Bangkok.

Cookbooks

Arjun Appadurai argues that cookbooks "reflect shifts in the boundaries of edibility, the proprieties of the culinary process, the logic of meals, the exigencies of the household budget, the vagaries of the market, and the structure of domestic ideologies" (1988: 3). Since the 1950s, Thai and English-language versions of Thai cook-

books have proliferated. These cookbooks are important for middle-class Thai families who lack servants, time, and expertise in Thai cooking, having grown up in families where it was the servants who knew how to prepare Thai dishes. Bhumi-chitr views technological innovations such as electric rice cookers and blenders as a means of bridging the awkward transitional period when households have neither servants nor cooking skills. Food vendors and small shops who supply ready-made curries and other meal components help fill this gap (see Szanton and Srisambhand 1986). So do cookbooks.

The outside world “discovered” Thai cuisine in the early sixties as the United States became embroiled in the Indochina war. In the preface to her 1981 cookbook, Brennan says that as Americans ended their tours of duty in Thailand, and as more Thai students travelled to the United States to “experience the good life,” both groups had need of cookbooks. Cookbooks written after 1975 generally attempt to reproduce authentic Thai tastes based on a simplification of the palace cuisine, which better suits the time and skills most people bring to preparing meals. Earlier cookbooks were less respectful of Thai flavor principles. For example, Marie Wilson’s cookbook was one of the first English cookbooks designed to introduce North Americans to Thai food. In it, she made the initial substitutions that no one familiar with Thai food would permit today: light on the chili peppers, soy sauce instead of fish sauce (since *nam pla* was not readily available in North America), and “do not overlook the use of monosodium glutamate” (1965: 15). More recent cookbooks (see Bhumichitr 1988) are feasts for the eyes as well as the stomach, although most are expensive. Closer examination of these Thai cookbooks will reveal the range of individual, regional, and seasonal differences in Thai cooking styles.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has attempted to demonstrate some sources of stability and vitality in the Thai culinary tradition. What better way to conclude and summarize the argument than by inviting the reader to consume a Thai meal.

The meal consists of glutinous or non-glutinous rice, usually served in a common bowl, with a number of sauces and side dishes to go with the rice served simultaneously. Food is eaten with fork and spoon, with chopsticks reserved for noodle dishes or snacks. Etiquette requires washing hands and face before and after the meal.

A complete central Thai meal consists of rice, soup, a curry, a steamed dish, a fried dish, a salad (*yam*), a strong hot sauce for dipping vegetables, a liquid dessert, a dry dessert, and fruit (Kritakara and Amranand 1977: 1; Brennan 1981: 70; Bhumichitr 1988: 41).

Out of the extraordinary range of Thai dishes certain ones are more likely to appear on the menu in Thai restaurants overseas. Many of these dishes are identified as *the* national soup or curry or dessert of Thailand. The meal might look something like this:

soup: *tom yam kung* (spicy sour shrimp soup)
 curry: *gaeng massaman* (Muslim curry)
 steamed dish: *haw mok* (steamed fish custard)
 fried dish: *mee krop* (fried sweet noodles)
 salad: *yam nua* (beef salad)
 sauce: *nam prik* (shrimp-paste sauce)
 liquid dessert: *sangkaya farang* (caramel cream)
 dry dessert: *thong yip* (golden threads dessert)

Tom yam kung, a hot, sour shrimp soup, is often described in restaurant menus and cookbooks as Thailand's national soup. *Gaeng Massaman*, a rich curry made from beef, peanuts, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, and regular Thai curry species, was probably brought to Bangkok around 1809 by Muslim officials employed by the Harbor Department (Brennan 1981: 137). *Haw mok*, a curried fish custard steamed in banana leaves is a delicacy from the Thai market tradition. Our fried dish is a sweet, fried noodle dish of Chinese origin "fast becoming elevated into the more refined culinary circles" (Brennan 1981: 21). Many years ago, this dish was served to me with a small flag of Thailand on top. *Yam nua*, a spicy beef salad with lime, fish sauce, and chili dressing, has northern and northeastern variants. *Nam prik*, the ubiquitous shrimp-paste dip served with fresh leaves and vegetables, could also be found in millions of village kitchens in Thailand, with no two versions tasting exactly alike. And for dessert, the European influence can be seen in both the wet and dry desserts. Foreigner's custard, caramel cream, is one of the most popular European desserts in Thailand. The famous golden threads (*thong yip*) probably developed from a Portuguese source during the Ayutthaya kingdom.

This meal demonstrates some of the principal components of Thai cuisine: the transformation of Muslim, Chinese, and regional specialties into Thai dishes; the integration of market foods and village foods into the classical meal format; borrowing from European traditions; and the elevation of certain popular recipes into national dishes.

The structure of Thai cuisine is stable in the ingredients used, cooking methods, and flavor principle. Although new ingredients may be added to dishes as they become available in Thailand and technological innovations such as rice cookers and blenders may simplify food preparation, the flavor principle carrying the identity of the cuisine remains constant. The flavor principle and taste judgements are what determine the success of dishes, meals, and restaurants for the Thai consumer and for converts to Thai cooking.

We currently speak of competing discourses within society, of multiple voices coexisting in a single universe of discourse. Meals are entities and events that reflect some of these competing discourses. For the Thai, meals are one of the most significant arenas for negotiating identity. Meals are always rooted in practical knowledge of the world—food praxis—as well as in the historical and cultural meaning of their ingredients and recipes. The current construction of a Thai national cuisine builds on an ancient Thai base reflected in the regional culinary traditions of the periphery (particularly the north and northeast), a vibrant market system currently being sanitized, and a muting of the distinctions between palace

food and peasant food. The “democratization” of palace food takes place with a justifiable pride in rediscovering or maintaining the skills necessary to produce food fit for royalty.

NOTE

Versions of this paper were presented in November 1989 at the meetings of the Canadian Council for Southeast Asian Studies in Vancouver and at the American Anthropological Association meetings. Although I have been interested in Thai food since the early seventies, I owe many of these ideas to the stimulation of colleagues at Australian National University, Canberra, where I presented some preliminary work on Thai food and ritual during a sabbatical visit in 1988. A paper for *Reviews in Anthropology* submitted in April 1988 developed some ideas on food praxis, although the review essay has yet to be published. Interviews with Khun Chalee Amatyakul, Mom Luang Tuey Xoomsai, and Mr. Dolf Riks were particularly helpful. In revising the paper for publication, I am grateful for suggestions made by Charuporn Paotatat, Pattanee Wirichagoon, Carole Counihan, and two very helpful anonymous reviewers.

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