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From Hunger Foods to Heritage Foods: Challenges to Food Localization in Lao PDR

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“A COMMODITY CHAIN is a series of interlinked exchanges through which a commodity and its constituents pass from extraction or harvesting through production to end use” (Ribot 1998:307). The end of the commodity chain for a small basket of crisps made of Lao river algae purchased for 40,000 kip (around \$4.00 U.S.) at a local market in Vientiane, Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), is my kitchen. But before I simply consume the algae chips, and their sweet counterparts, cassava chips, I want to place them in a broader interpretive framework than commodity chains and use them to interrogate the ethics of exotic foods. I do this first by placing these two food items in the context of Lao national food security, and then in the context of Southeast Asian culinary traditions. But the story of these chips is neither linear nor unambiguous. Nor are these food products centrally important to anyone’s diet. They are marginal in the Lao diet where the chain begins and in the North American diet where it ends—marginal in multiple ways and in multiple contexts. It is their marginality I want to reflect upon in this chapter.

Under conditions of food insecurity and seasonal scarcity, Lao cooks—usually women—rely heavily on collecting wild foods from the forest. They make ingenious use of wild foods considered exotic by outsiders, such as crickets, green tree ant eggs, river algae, wild cassava, and wild yams. These regionally specific seasonal foods are not always part of the regular diet of the lowland Lao; we might refer to them as *hunger foods*—foods that act as insurance against hunger in times of seasonal or catastrophic food shortages.

This chapter argues that the rarer and harder these foods are for the Lao to obtain, the more valued they have become to North American and European chefs. How have seasonal hunger foods become heritage foods in the gourmet boutiques of Europe and North America? In the quest for new ingredients and new tastes for chefs and consumers, some importers have discovered elements of the Lao cuisine that can be sold as specialties in niche markets. These include products that are



produced in the northern region of Luang Prabang, Lao PDR, like *khai pen* (river algae sheets), and products created out of cassava such as *khao kiep* (cassava crisps). These items have been redesigned to meet Western tastes. In California, where food boutiques and food banks stand side by side, these two Lao food items have begun to appear in specialty food shops and online shopping services, provisioners of yuppie chow.

Being Food Insecure

Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), a landlocked country in Southeast Asia, is classified as a low-income, food deficit country. After decades of war, including fighting for independence from French colonial control and surviving the bombing inflicted by the American secret war in Laos, the country remains food insecure.

With a per capita income of around \$400, Lao PDR is one of the poorest and least developed countries in Asia. This poverty is reflected in the nutritional status of its population. Forty percent of children under five are underweight, 41 percent stunted, and 15 percent wasted (Health Status of the People in Lao PDR, 2001). The prevalence of wasting among children increased to 15 percent in 2000, and the presence of chronic energy deficiency among adults was "alarmingly high (19 percent), even higher than reported during a previous survey in 1995 (14 percent)" (FAO country profile). According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) country profile on Lao PDR, "the daily dietary energy supply per capita increased from 2030 kcal in 1968 to 2400 kcal in 1995." Almost 30 percent of the population is below the minimal level of dietary energy consumption. Household food insecurity is defined by the government as the inability to provide 2,100 calories per person per day. To reduce the number of poverty households, the government reduced the minimal dietary energy requirements to 1,983 calories per day (Millennium Development Goals 2004:6). Clearly there is a poor fit between the measurement of calories nationally and the hunger and malnutrition experienced by individuals in households.

Local and national food shortages are not relieved by trade in food items. Food imports and exports are minimal, government controlled, and directed toward urban markets. Lao PDR is a closed, protected trading system—but one where informal and nonformal trade with China, Vietnam, and Thailand thrives. Stocks of stored rice are available neither nationally nor locally, as most households do not produce enough rice to meet their needs and have to purchase it. About half the provinces regularly fail to reach rice self-sufficiency because of drought, flooding, or underproduction related to irrigation problems. Since rice provides over 80 percent of total calorie intake (UNDP 2003), many households are food insecure and have



to stretch rice with other foods. In Lao PDR, as in Vietnam, gruels made from broken rice grains, rice flour, and tubers such as cassava or yam "saved a lot of people from famine" (Nguyen 2001:94). In short, for some households in some communities in some seasons, food itself is a scarce commodity.

In response, the Lao government has developed policies to improve the nutritional status of Lao families by enhancing Lao food self-sufficiency and encouraging the production and export of cash crops. Lao government planning gives highest priority to reducing poverty especially in rural areas, by improving the food security and nutrition situation through diversification of the Lao diet. Integration into global markets is part of this plan: "The Lao government believes in the globalization process since it considers that it will create a propitious environment for achieving the over-arching goal of alleviating poverty and creating a more prosperous and peaceful society" (Lao PDR 2000:29).

But has Lao PDR always been food insecure? Recently (2001) the Asian Development Bank concluded that poverty in Lao PDR is "new poverty," produced by the process of development. The policy imperative driving market integration has made things worse for most Lao, and better for a few. Efforts to increase market integration are increasing this policy-induced new poverty, so that the more remote communities are actually more food secure than communities close to roads (EU 1997:20). Yet, government policies operate on the assumption that remoteness and lack of market integration is a cause of poverty. This chapter provides one example of what happens when the market comes to remote locations where food insecurity is common. Market integration makes possible the movement of some food products out of the Lao food system and into the North American, and the constant devaluation of the Lao currency (*kip*) makes some food products more valuable outside the country than inside.

Culinary Complexes of Southeast Asia

That poverty and food shortages may be recent experiences for the Lao explains why the country retains its self-identity around concepts of hospitality and food sharing. A Lao proverb states: "You can live in a narrow space, but it's hard to live with a narrow heart" (Rakow 1992:54); failure to share food is evidence of a narrow heart. Southeast Asian cuisines, including the Lao, are born of festive meals, communally prepared and eaten (Ho 1995:8).

Food as a focus of interest in Southeast Asia has been a matter of praxis not analysis, unless by analysis we consider the endless evaluations of food, flavors, and eating experiences that dominate discussions in rural and urban communities. Food matters to people at many levels, but it has rarely figured analytically in the work of anthropologists of Southeast Asia. However, the area is favored by food writers



such as Alford and Duguid, whose award-winning books on Asian foods (*Hot Sour Salty Sweet: A Culinary Journey through Southeast Asia*, 2002; *Seductions of Rice*, 1998) easily delineate the boundaries and characteristics of Southeast Asia as a culinary area.

In addition to cookbook authors, linguists have also provided clues that suggest food is something worth talking and thinking about throughout Southeast Asia. Different Southeast Asian language families make similar distinctions between cooked and uncooked rice and contain multiple verbs for drying and cutting (Matisoff 1992), hinting about the existence of a regional culinary complex. Culinary terms are critical to aligning otherwise distinct cultures, even before globalization made *pad Thai* (Thai fried noodles) a household word (cf. Van Esterik 1992).

For economic anthropologists, using food systems as a means of defining ethnic and agricultural boundaries within a Southeast Asian culture area suggests an outmoded theoretical concern with classification, diffusion, and typologies. But without a perspective on the structure of typical meals, we are more likely to consider food items such as river weed and wild cassava in isolation, rather than as parts of historically produced complexes. O'Connor's (1995) model of agricultural change in Southeast Asia calls for a regional anthropology that situates agro-cultural complexes within regional history. In our admiration for fieldwork-driven empiricism, he argues, we have avoided regional comparisons, lest we be accused of returning to a theoretically antiquated culture area concept, unsuitable for addressing questions of globalization and transnational migration. Although only the broadest outlines of the regional food system are provided here, Lao food systems emerged out of past systems and bear some relation to comparable systems elsewhere in the region.

Southeast Asian culinary complexes include: rice as the central source of calories and a dominant cultural symbol of feminine nurture, fermented fish products, soups, local fresh vegetables and herbs, spicy dipping sauces to add zest to bland rice, and meat or fish in variable amounts. Most meal formats feature rice in a common bowl with side dishes presented simultaneously. Throughout Southeast Asia, and particularly in Lao PDR, we taste the rural roots of the cuisine.

Lao Food System

The Lao government recognizes sixty-five distinct ethnic groups, although it stresses "unity in diversity" among all ethnic groups. The food system discussed here is characteristic of lowland Lao *Lum* groups, the dominant majority making up 68 percent of the population. Lao PDR is a country of subsistence rice farmers, with some minority groups growing maize and cassava in addition to rice. As elsewhere in the world, rice as the key staple is valued far beyond its nutritional value (Bray 1986; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993; Goody 1982; Hanks 1972). The key marker of the collective identity of lowland Lao is the use of glutinous or sticky



rice. Only more recent arrivals to the country such as the Yao and Hmong prefer nonglutinous rice (Schiller et al. 1998:228). Recent rice surveys have found over 3,200 varieties in the country, 85 percent of them glutinous (Rao et al. 2001). Most glutinous rice is consumed less than fifty kilometers from its place of production (Nguyen 2001:112). And no rice tastes better than the rice grown at home. While Lao and Vietnamese who use glutinous rice as their daily staple celebrate the taste of their local rice varieties, a European visitor in 1877 did not like the "stickiness" of glutinous rice, referring to it as that "ghastly rice of Laotians" (Nguyen 2001:64).

Glutinous rice is by far the preferred rice for the lowland Lao. It is an understatement to say that the Lao appreciate the qualities of glutinous rice; like the Vietnamese, they deeply believe that glutinous rice is more nutritious and more aromatic than any other kind of rice. In Vietnam, contests were held to perfect glutinous rice steaming skills for young girls and men (Nguyen 2001:57). Lao are very conscious of the aromatic and cooking qualities of glutinous rice, as well as its keeping quality (Schiller et al. 1998:234). This is equally true of families with adequate rice and families who must buy rice because their own fields have not produced enough, or because they have no access to rice fields.

Accompanying most rice meals is a sauce or paste made from fermented local fish or shellfish. The fish are salted, dried, pounded, and packed with toasted rice and rice husk in jars for a month or more. Fish sauce (*nam pa*) is a crucial ingredient in many dishes. In its thicker form (*padek*), it is served as a dish with rice. The strong-smelling product is not appealing to many westerners who have little tolerance for fermented, fishy foods, but overseas Lao speak longingly of the taste of local versions recalled nostalgically from their homeland.

Fresh greens and herbs are available from household gardens and local markets. Recent development projects on home gardens have dramatically increased the amount of fresh vegetables available to households. In pilot projects, families participating in these projects consumed three times more vegetables than they sold. However, households need land, labor, and seeds to benefit from these initiatives. Vegetables are served in soups; stir fried with onion, garlic, meat, or fish; or served raw with fermented fish products or dipping sauces (*jeaw*).

There is a clear continuity between medicinal and culinary use of herbs and other forest products. Ginger, coriander root, and aromatic woods play important roles in both medicinal and culinary systems. Elders, both male and female, generally know where to locate these products if they still live in the same localities where they were taught to locate and process these items when they were young. However, relocated individuals and households may not know where to obtain wild foods, particularly medicinal herbs, and may not know how to process them to remove toxins. Correct processing and prescribing requires specialized knowledge. For example, wild cassava needs to be carefully processed to remove toxins; elders report that young people



may have no idea how to find or process wild cassava, although they recall eating it mixed with rice when rice supplies were low. In other parts of the world knowledge of how to process toxic tubers has already been lost, resulting in deaths from cyanide poisoning (Cardoso et al. 2005).

In Lao PDR, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, dipping sauces add zest to bland rice, stimulating appetites, and tempting intemperate eaters to consume more calories from starchy staples. With the early adoption of chili peppers, originally from America, Lao developed local sauces (*jeaw*) made from ingredients such as peppers, garlic, lime, sugar, fish sauce, onions, and coriander—each combination unique to a region, community, or household. Some dry *jeaw* consist primarily of salt and chili peppers and are not given to children.

Meat and fish are valued parts of Lao diets. Variable amounts of fish or meats are mixed with herbs and spices in stews and soups; large amounts of meat or fish are grilled mainly for communal festive meals. Meat or fish may also be used in soups served in communal or individual dishes. Soups are particularly valued as they allow cooks to stretch ingredients, make use of bones, and generally expand the meal to serve more people.

Squirrels, snakes, frogs, crickets, and insects also supply protein, along with freshwater fish, although there is clear preference for chicken, pork, duck, or beef, should cash be available to purchase meat. Domestic animals in Lao communities do not fare well without regular vaccinations, although development projects attempt to increase domestic livestock and poultry. Most projects fail unless external aid projects are able to provide extension support.

Fermented rice liquor (*laolao*) plays a key role in all celebrations, as consumption of alcohol creates links between the living and the dead, humans and spirits, and guests and hosts. Among minority groups living north of Luang Prabang, rice alcohol is kept in heirloom jars (Nguyen 2001:73), and in the past was a necessary ingredient for oath taking and other rituals. Producing *laolao* used to be a household enterprise in the past, but more recently, liquor is purchased from local enterprises where glutinous rice is grown specifically for this purpose. Steamed sticky rice is fermented with balls of yeast for about a week, when it is distilled and consumed (Schiller et al. 2001:236).

Food in Motion

Describing the structure of the Lao food system as I have done above overstates the continuity of traditional food items and meal formats. But the structure of systems of food production and consumption in Lao PDR may provide valuable opportunities for examining diversity and continuities, including historical transformations brought about through processes of colonization, development, and globalization.



Colonialism affected the Lao food system in many ways: French bread, pâté, and salads clearly came from the French colonial experience. Many urban and overseas Lao substitute baguettes for glutinous rice for breakfast. What is known as Luang Prabang salad exemplifies the fusion of French salad traditions and the Lao practice of providing plates of raw or steamed vegetables and herbs to go with dipping sauces. Foo (2002:18, 88) describes Lao long lunches as a colonial remnant, and notes that the popularity of French baguettes endured longer than the bricks of colonial buildings. However, apart from freshly baked baguettes, the French had less impact on the Lao food system than on the Vietnamese (cf. Norindr 1996).

Other changes can be linked to development processes within Lao PDR. Because of government policies to reduce slash-and-burn upland agriculture and to increase production of cash crops, Lao farmers with access to irrigated fields have been encouraged to produce nonglutinous rice for sale. The few new varieties of glutinous and nonglutinous rice grown in irrigated fields in the central region of Lao PDR since 1993 require fertilizers, mechanical threshers, and hand tractors in order to make a profit (Schiller et al. 1998:226). The small amount of glutinous rice exported for use by overseas Lao comes from northeastern Thailand, and overseas Lao find Thai rice less flavorful than the rice they remember from home villages.

While Lao make distinctions between people who eat glutinous rice and those who eat nonglutinous rice, in fact, the distinction is somewhat arbitrary and is breaking down rapidly. Ordinary or nonglutinous rice can become glutinous, and glutinous rice can become ordinary rice, as the glutinous character of the rice endosperm is reversible (Nguyen 2001:26). Lao have selected for glutinous characteristics that increase with domestication (Nguyen 2001:20). Just as the product itself can change over time, so too is the way rice is served. Several Hmong and lowland Lao households I visited in 2005 had both glutinous and nonglutinous rice in their kitchens, and rural restaurants served both kinds of rice in the same meal. Glutinous rice can no longer be considered unambiguously as the primary marker of Lao ethnic identity.

Conversion of forests to agricultural land and the expansion of commercial logging have reduced forests in many parts of Lao PDR. Villagers complain that it is now more difficult to collect wild greens from these shrinking forest reserves. In addition, the valuable nontimber forest products (NTFP) that have provided both emergency food for poor households and income for many more households can now be sold more conveniently by locals or, more often, by middlemen who are able to access NTFP and new markets more directly, thanks to new roads.

Wild Meat and Fish

Forest animals are harder to find now than in the past. To obtain meat, Lao villagers now need to go deeper into the forest and become even more skilled hunters. Where



a dozen years ago, villagers in Champassak province in southern Laos reported an abundance of animals and fish close to their villages, now many species have disappeared; a two-day trek might yield nothing and an hour fishing might yield half a kilogram of fish (UNDP 2003:82).

Villagers speak with nostalgia of the days when the giant Mekong catfish (*Pangasianodon gigas*), now close to extinction, could still be caught (Heldke 2003:74; Davidson 1975; Levy 1986). Like river algae, the rarity of the giant catfish makes it doubly appealing to Western food adventurers. After eating Lao catfish soup, food writer Levy comments: "Certainly, a local fisherman did catch one of the huge creatures some time that week. It's a horrible thought, but it could have been the last one. And, readers, we ate it" (1986:190).

There is a well-developed trade in endangered species across the borders to Thailand and Vietnam. Eating exotic animals, including eating uncustomary parts of customary animals, and eating animals rarely consumed in North America such as bears, dogs, and cats, as well as wild animals that are dangerous to catch or process, is thrilling for a food adventurer (Heldke 2003:71).

The wild animals are not always eaten but rather may be traded for the body parts with medicinal value (horn, antler, teeth, bone, gallbladder, shell, blood, excrement, urine [Baird 1995]) as part of systems of contagious magic. Lao healers report that an animal part used for medicine can "last a lifetime" (Baird 1995:22), and some claim that the overharvesting of endangered species is driven by the demand for these products in Vietnam, China, and Thailand.

Exports for Gourmets

Globalization has brought in new stakeholders who are looking at Lao food resources from very different perspectives. In spite of national food insecurity—or perhaps because of it—Lao PDR has become a site for agricultural, pharmaceutical, and gastronomic bioprospecting. Agribusinesses want to patent the incredibly diverse rice varieties found in different regions of Lao PDR. "The development of 'boutique rices' that combine the glutinous endosperm and aromatic character of many traditional Lao rices is regarded as having the greatest potential for the export market," concludes a report from the Lao-IRRI project and the National Agricultural Research Institute (Schiller et al. 2001:240). Pharmaceutical companies want access to the herbs and other plant resources (most are wild NTFP), along with the specialized knowledge of traditional healers, in order to discover, develop, and patent new drugs to combat malaria, cancer, and HIV/AIDS. Lao communities have used these products for centuries as medicinal cures and ingested them in soups and tonic drinks in the absence of adequate primary health care. These products are now being exported to make medicinal tonics in China, Vietnam, and Thailand, endangering the herbal resources available for future generations of Lao.



Khai Pen and Khao Kiep

Culinary bioprospecting in Lao PDR has attracted new entrepreneurs—both Lao and non-Lao—who want rare ingredients and new tastes for chefs and Western consumers. This brings me back to the seasonal hunger foods mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. Few Westerners have the opportunity to visit exotic Luang Prabang, the former royal capital. But they can consume rare foods that come from there—foods like *khai pen* (river algae sheets) and *khao kiep* (cassava crisps) that have been romanticized by association with the former royal palace. The recipe book of the former royal chef includes a dish made from river algae mixed with ground pork (Sing 1981:235).

A few well-traveled individuals discovered these foods and publicized their features, while others developed the products, arranged their export, and introduced them into new markets. The sale of these rare, exotic food items is neither a large nor a particularly profitable business, but it requires a great deal of culinary capital on the part of the distributors and their customers.

Khai pen is made from a river weed (*khai*), as it is known in the north of the country, a variety of green algae (*chlorophyceae*) collected from the fast-flowing rivers of northern Laos and Thailand. It is harvested in winter, from November to January; the algae identified as *thao* was also collected from stagnant water in the rainy season (Sing 1981:25). Although it was used in royal households, it was more common in poor households: "Households that routinely suffer from food insecurity in the form of insufficient rice often depend on wild aquatic resources to compensate for this deficiency" (Meusch et al. 2003:22). River algae was consumed two to four times a week by more than half the households surveyed in a study of the value of aquatic resources in southern Attapeu province (Meusch et al. 2003:31). It was probably consumed in simple water-based soups rather than used to make *khai pen*.

Families, including children, collect the bright green algae that looks like fine seaweed from rocks on the sides of rivers. To make *khai pen*, the algae is spread in the sun to dry and processed by pressing dried tomatoes, garlic, chilies, sesame seeds, and salt into the dried sheets. The sheets are held together with tamarind paste. They can be cut into strips and used as flavoring in vegetable dishes or fried rice (Alford and Duguid 2000:165) or grilled and served as a snack with drinks. In Lao PDR, it is primarily served to men in town bars. According to *New York Times* food writer Florence Fabricant, *khai pen* has a "pleasantly earthy, slightly spinach-like flavor that is both nutty and peppery" (Fabricant 2002:D3).

Once the algae is removed from the subsistence system, commodified, and reintroduced into Lao markets as *khai pen*, it is expensive to purchase; it costs approximately one dollar for four large sheets in the markets of Luang Prabang and \$7.49 (reduced from \$9.99) for four very small sheets from a California-based, online food boutique.



One Lao couple in Vientiane has been producing Lao algae chips for three years; they estimate they have sold between three and five hundred kilos in that period. They developed and marketed the product because they are interested in preserving traditional Lao recipes. The algae is collected by networks of women who gather it by hand, helped by their children, from fast-flowing rivers around Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang. They could also collect river algae from the southern provinces, and thus expand their market without endangering the river environment. Locals, they say, are not yet aware of the possibility of collecting and selling the algae.

In order to control the quality, insure the cleanliness of the product, regulate its taste, and insure proper preservation, they process the product themselves in their house in Vientiane. They have increased its shelf life up to six months by drying it in special ovens to remove the moisture and destroy the germs. The algae chips are distributed through a few outlets in the capital frequented by foreigners, where four small sheets are sold in a Lao basket for forty thousand kip (with five thousand kip profit for the company). It is also sold at the airport, where Japanese visitors and visiting Lao expatriates buy it in great quantities—forty to fifty boxes at a time—often for gifts. They complain that few local shops are interested in their products because of the demand for imported food.

In some parts of Southeast Asia, cassava is collected wild as an emergency food; in other areas, it is planted in upland fields as a dry season crop; in Thailand, it is grown for animal fodder. But wherever root crops are grown in Southeast Asia, they are freely given up for the more prestigious rice: “Rice advances across Southeast Asia as if it were addictive” (O’Connor 1995:986). But root crops are never entirely abandoned. In the forests of Lao PDR, wild yams, cassava, and taro are collected by women who know where to find them and how to process them to remove poisons, if necessary, by soaking, cooking, and drying the roots. Once harvested, cassava tubers are very perishable and hard to store. Cassava tubers have a high carbohydrate content and are a good source of potassium, iron, magnesium, vitamin C, and other vitamins. Currently, the same entrepreneurs who are marketing *khai pen* are also marketing sweet and savory cassava cakes for sale in California and online. Their household-based production involves forming the flat cakes in a simple wooden press and sun-drying them. Cassava crisps—semi-savory or sweet—are also available from Lotus foods for \$7.49 (reduced from \$9.99) per package. These products are too expensive for Lao families to purchase in either country.

The products were promoted by a luncheon presentation in New York on May 30, 2002, where well-known chefs from New York and Chicago prepared them in specialties such as “grilled *kaipen* wrapped seabass with somen noodles and cilantro vinaigrette,” “*kaipen* with Asian guacamole,” “smoked corn and *kaipen* fritters,” and “cassava sesame crisp tacos with grilled shrimp, rice noodles, bean sprouts and tangy dipping sauce.”



New roads in Lao PDR made it possible for these products to leave the localities where they were produced; the newly integrated market economy made it possible for them to make their way to food boutiques in San Francisco and Toronto.

Conclusion

Foods and their meanings are increasingly mobile in a globalized food market. But the same foods have very different meanings in different contexts—river algae in soup as a side dish with sticky rice for a Lao subsistence farmer, or as grilled *kaipen*-wrapped sea bass with noodles and cilantro vinaigrette in an upscale Chicago restaurant; wild cassava to stretch sticky rice in a Lao community, or as the base for cassava sesame crisp baskets with lobster, chorizo, and lobster stock emulsion in that same Chicago restaurant.

Lao farmers use these products as part of their seasonal subsistence strategies and as insurance against crop failure. North American chefs use them to experiment with new taste combinations and perhaps to attract new admirers. Further examination of the commodity chain linking Lao river algae chips and cassava cakes to North American specialty food markets requires close attention to the meaning of *scarce*, *rare*, and *exotic*. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *scarce* as “restricted in quantity, size or amount, accessible in deficient quantity or limited number” (2658); *rare* denotes “seldom appearing, infrequent, uncommon, exceptional, unusual in respect to some good quality, of uncommon excellence” (2417). These foods are scarce to Lao farmers who harvest them, but rare to the North American chefs who cook them. It is their rarity that makes them exotic to the latter group.

Hunger foods and heritage foods represent disconnected discourses. My task here has been to identify these discourses and link them together, acting as the broker of these stories, just as food importers act as business brokers to provide exotic foods to North American consumers. Yet it would be a mistake to overstate the obvious binaries inherent in this story: slow food in Lao PDR becoming fast food snacks in North America; hunger over there, abundance over here; traditional food being given new life in another locale; poverty food necessities used as exotic expensive luxuries; here and there, then and now.

Such binaries force us to make moral judgments about the interconnections between food systems. On the one hand, a few Lao households are making extra income by providing these products to local entrepreneurs. On the other, the export of these products might destroy the scarce resource base both locals and exporters depend on. But the products are of interest in California and Toronto only as long as they remain exotic and rare. These particular items are no longer found in Toronto gourmet shops but must be ordered on the internet. In fact, the long-term demand for river weed and wild cassava would reduce their availability to Lao households as emergency hunger foods.



This chapter also questions the contrast between poverty foods and luxury foods. Lao villagers might well prefer pork loin to boiled pork backs, chicken breast to chicken feet, shrimp to crickets. Chicken feet and crickets are not the poverty foods that become exotic rare treats for foodies, notwithstanding the craze for chocolate-covered insects in the 1960s—foods used by teens to “gross people out.” These latter products were food fads of short duration. Similarly, the interest in *khai pen* and *khao kiep* in North America is unlikely to last long.

The slow-fast distinction makes little sense in the Lao case. Lao food is unusually slow in preparation compared to Thai and other Asian cuisines. Rice must be soaked and steamed, fish products fermented, vegetables, fruits, and herbs collected and eaten fresh, or sun dried. But this is not the slow food envisioned by the Italian Slow Food movement.

When hunger foods, whose origins are inextricably linked to a place or tradition, are taken out of such traditions, away from their roots, their *terroir* (flavor unique to a particular region and soil), they no longer function as seasonal insurance and become instead markers of elite consumption in very different food systems. This decoupling of food from people and culture, of production from consumption, raises a question for future research: What are the boundaries between fascination with food—its taste and textures—and food fanaticism, with its prescriptive rules and border patrolling of what is ingested? How do these boundaries shift during globalization and the development of transnational commodity chains when the food deprived and the food obsessed eat the same food? *Bon appetit!*

Note

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Tasting the Worlds of Yesterday and Today: Culinary Tourism and Nostalgia Foods in Post-Soviet Russia

7

MELISSA L. CALDWELL



THROUGHOUT THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, when Russians' abilities to travel abroad were limited by government restrictions and their own personal finances (see Barker 1999), food travel offered a unique means to experience foreign cultures. For Soviet citizens, the Soviet Union's Moscow-based Exhibition of the Achievements of the National Economies (*VDNKH*) exposed domestic tourists to the cultural and technological treasures of each of the fifteen republics. Included in these virtual tours were national dishes of the various republics (Glants and Toomre 1997). More recently, travel themes were again prominently displayed when McDonald's opened its first Soviet restaurant in January 1990, nineteen months before the breakup of the U.S.S.R. In a documentary recording the grand opening festivities in Moscow, provocatively titled *A Taste of the West*, one Russian customer was asked why he had made the trip to the Moscow restaurant on its opening day. The man replied that he wanted to be able to travel abroad without leaving the country.¹ Travel themes are reproduced inside this restaurant, which is decorated with a "see-the-world" motif: miniature replicas of world landmarks like the Eiffel Tower decorate one room; large, red Chinese gates lead into a room with an Asian theme; a third room resembles the inside of a Dixieland steamboat, complete with "windows" that look out onto scenes along the banks of the Mississippi River. A mural painted on the walls of another McDonald's restaurant in Moscow depicts Ronald McDonald and his friends riding a train bound for various destinations in Russia and Ukraine. During the restaurant's early years in Russia, the company also aired on Russian television a children's animated program that followed the adventures of McDonald's characters as they traveled around the world—of course, only to destinations with McDonald's restaurants (Hume 1990:51).

In the current post-Soviet moment, restrictions on Russian citizens' abilities to travel domestically and abroad have eased, and the Russian public's preoccupation with travel has become more apparent. As modes of travel have become