

Constructing “Thainess” in Thai Gastronomy in Five-Star Hotels in Bangkok: Case Studies of *Nahm* and *Sala Rim Naam*¹

Niphatchanok Najpinij²

Abstract

This article aims at studying the characteristics of Thai gastronomy and analyzing the process of constructing “Thainess” through Thai gastronomy in Thai restaurants located in five-star hotels in Bangkok. Two Thai restaurants in five-star hotels in central Bangkok were selected as case studies: *Nahm* at The Metropolitan Hotel Bangkok; and *Sala Rim Naam* at The Mandarin Oriental Hotel Bangkok. The research findings reveal that Thainess is constructed through three characteristics: firstly, through physical settings and an enhanced atmosphere with Thai art and architecture, both traditional and contemporary; secondly, through a Thai style of service by personnel with politeness and hospitality; and thirdly, through culinary practices.

The research found that each restaurant selects the identity and presents Thainess differently through various components related to Thai gastronomy. Production and consumption of Thai food is based on the relations, expectations, values and standards mutually agreed

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² PhD (Thai Studies), Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. Lecturer, School of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Suan Dusit Rajabhat University, Bangkok, Thailand.

between the “hosts” and “guests.” The production process also concerns Thai culinary regulations and, given the fact that these Thai restaurants are in an international food space, international standards must be implemented together with Thainess in the Thai food space. It was further found that the process of constructing meanings and Thainess is very dynamic since these Thai restaurants are situated in the context of globalization, thus, Thainess in Thai gastronomy is internationally negotiated.

Introduction

Thai gastronomy is gaining attention from people around the world, with “Thainess” dynamically constructed in Thai gastronomy. Tourism and internationality play significant roles on swaying contextual meanings of Thai gastronomy. Local concepts and international standards have negotiated their representations on different food spaces in an interesting manner.

Humans have always placed food in the center of their life. As supported by Sokolov, Van Esterik and Turmo, food signifies humans and humans also are signified by their food.³ The natural environment enables physical sustenance and human spiritually to connect with nature, alongside cultural activities. The meaning of Thai gastronomy is involved with various parts of Thai life and consumption. Thai food is a part of this meaning, however there are many more factors in defining the concept that are involved broadly and deeply with biodiversities, the practices focused on kitchen production and the physical or emotional enjoyment gained through dining.

Lashley, Morrison and Lynch point out that working hours and private lives set through modern values have contributed to more leisure time, which benefits the tourist industry.⁴ Hospitality in the tourist spaces is where “world” values are synergized. Private and

³ Sokolov, *Why we eat and What we eat*; Van Esterik, *Food and Culture: A Reader*; Turmo, *Anthropology of Food*.

⁴ Lashley, *Hospitality; A Social Lens*.

public lives are woven together and overlap, including the preparation of home meals and commercially provided food. The meaning of Thai gastronomy has gained less insight from local wisdom, which was once strongly bound with agriculture and the home. “World” ideas have constantly interacted and have been exchanged with local values and those concepts have been applied to Thai gastronomy and Thai ways of life.

The rise of postmodernism in Thailand, the other side of the globalization coin, has constructed Thai gastronomy in interesting choices that are in tension with the modern food system. Commercially driven food in mass production has long occupied many food typologies, even in Thai homes. Eating-out or brought-in food is the mainstream consumption in large cities. This type of food, while economical in terms of volume and prices, does not really provide for healthy benefits or social values. The modern food system has been researched and its negative outcomes explained by Ritzer.⁵ The health concern is a world agenda as people and nature have been physically affected. “World food security” is highlighted. Therefore, humans are turning to *sustainable meals* aimed at the body, environment and society, which motivates people to adopt a slower pace against the modern food system in accordance with a slow life and slow food, as shared by Petrini.⁶

Moreover, because of the long term recession of the world economy, people look for reasonable *foodways* with respect to price. “Practical meals”, called “comfort food”, combine healthiness with simplicity, fair, good taste, and convenience.

Through the help of tourism, as well as the efforts of the government in the promotion, Thai food is globally welcomed for its health benefits paired with “taste”. Thai food is produced not only in Thai restaurant abroad, but is also cooked often in private spaces.

However, Thai food in such moving paces conveys inevitable slippery practices and related meaning. The “values” of Thai gastronomy are produced and reproduced by international spheres and

⁵ Ritzer, “The McDonaldization of Society”.

⁶ Petrini, *Slow Food*.

are then often brought back to the home land. *Pad Thai* made with ketchup is an example. Local Thai restaurants are using this tomato sauce alongside tamarind paste in echo of what has been practiced with Thai food abroad.

The research presented in this article was conducted in order to analyze Thai gastronomy as presented in Thai restaurants in five-star hotels in Bangkok, and is aimed at analyzing the process of constructing Thainess through Thai gastronomy in international and tourist settings. In this article, two prominent Thai restaurants were selected as case studies of the representation of Thainess gastronomy in international food spaces. Both of them are world famous Thai restaurants; however they focus on their gastronomic process differently. While *Sala Rim Naam* (ศาลาริมน้ำ) at The Mandarin Oriental Hotel, Bangkok is admired for its notable service and timeless atmosphere, *Nahm* (น้ำ) at The Metropolitan Hotel, Bangkok is highlighting for its culinary practice using “Thainess” that has been scrutinized from the past and local areas.

Background of Thai Gastronomy

Prior to describing how Thai gastronomy is constructed and presented in Thai restaurants located in five-star hotels, Thai gastronomy through time and space in historical and cultural contexts will be discussed.

Civilization of the Central Plains

The pillars of Thai gastronomy in present days can be traced to biodiversities contributed from both nature and culture as condensed in the central plains of Thailand. Several ingredients from nature and agriculture have been fostered along with the ways of life. Such supplies were not only enough for internal consumption, but were also exported to many foreign countries. Nowadays, natural and cultural aspects are woven on the Chaophraya delta as expressed in gastronomic concepts of general food spaces, especially where tourism is involved.

Ample water for agriculture and annual flooding promote natural resources in an unlimited choice of culinary arts. People in the old days adapted life to fit with their environmental circumstances. Housing on poles was aimed at living properly in the flood season. All facilities were on the second floor, including the kitchen and open space for household communal activities. The ground floor was left vacant and a boat was then used as transportation during such wet times. This Thai architectural style has been adapted in many hotel spaces.

The fertile environment condensed along the Chaophraya River is where both the present capital city, Bangkok, and the former, Ayutthaya, are located. Numerous river products, such as fish and river prawn, and herbs and fruits take turns in providing products through the seasons. In addition, in proximity of space and travel time, the Gulf of Thailand and the southern sea supply year round seafood, especially used for shrimp paste and fish sauce, which are key seasonings of Thai food. Such abundances allow room for culinary arts to a larger extent than for other regions.

The temperature around this area is also beneficial to the culinary arts. Since it is hot and humid, the food has to be cook with high temperature. While freshness from nature might be negated, the various choices offered from nature compensate for such lost “taste”. Thai cuisine is naturally seasoned, and Thais know how to blend eight flavors. The food offers medicinal aspects along with the culinary practices, which is part of Thai medical heritage. Synergized values from such factors have formed the central plains as the domain of civilization.

While ecology contributes character, people have evolved with food. Ceremonies and events are customarily tied with agriculture. Spiritual meanings are constructed to motivate the production. Thainess is gained from the values of many groups of people. Boonyong Chunsuvimol explained that before the Rattanakosin era, acculturation continuously occurred between local and racial groups, including Chinese, Vietnamese, hill tribes, Malay, and Indian.⁷

⁷ Chunsuvimol, *Multi-Racial Society* (in Thai).

A famous snack called *miang kham* [มี่ยงคำ] is a good example of how food culture on the central plains has formed, and also portrays how food and culture is connected. *Miang kham* includes seven bits of simple ingredients with a sweet and salty sauce made from shrimp paste and palm sugar. All of these ingredients are wrapped in a betel leaf and chewed together in one bite. The ingredients are derived from the natural diversity on the central plains, such as the assorted herbs including toasted coconut, lime with zest, shallots and chilies. Additionally, dry shrimp is a source of protein offered from the nearby seafont. Each little piece contributes eight different healthy benefits, as well as eight savors and complex textures within the same bite. This food can also be considered a binder in society as it is often used for offering friendliness when welcoming guests.

Cosmopolitan Thai Society

Visitors, from either the Oriental or Western spheres, have made trips to this area since ancient times. Relationships through trading and national diplomacy in the past exposed the people to a “new” ecology, along with different methods of cooking and the dynamic meaning of a “good” dish. Visits and settlements of international people have allowed for the sharing of life and values, such as chilies and egg-yolk desserts introduced by the Portuguese who came in the Ayutthaya era. As well, Thai curries have been adapted with spices associating with the Persians, and stir-frying on iron utensil using a lot of ingredients came with the migrating Chinese. With respect to the Chinese, they are the most economically powerful group in Thai society as mentioned by Pongsapith.⁸

Apart from the influence directly on food practices, contact with foreigners has allowed Siamese people to share views related or apart from gastronomy with others. Thais have been admired for being good hosts. Friendliness and kindness is well known from memoirs written by foreigners. Hospitality has been viewed by Westerners who came since the Ayutthaya period until the time of

⁸ Pongsapith, “Chinese settlers and Their Role in Modern Thailand”, 135-142 (in Thai).

national reform in 1932, with an impression gained either through Thai manners or food. Welcoming people with thoughtfulness and care has often been mentioned positively regarding the Siamese in studies of Sivasariyanont and Buntharikvivat.⁹

Foreigners have interacted with local people and absorbed some practices into their own lives. For instance, Persian nobles who served under many reigns from Ayutthaya until Rattanakosin finally decided to become Buddhists. Their food legacy, such as spices, milk and meat cooked in large pieces, has been blended with local culinary practices. Local herbs, such as chilies, garlic, shallots, galangal and lemongrass, have been mixed with Muslim spices, and coconut milk has been used in producing the Thai version of curry instead of animal milk.

Continuity of the Monarchy

Another key factor of Thai gastronomy is the continuity of the monarchy which has influenced the sophistication of Thai gastronomy. Believing in the father and the divine kings has been cultivated in Thai society. Royal food has been cultivated with respect to the ruler within two meanings. In the Sukhothai period, people were ruled in a family-like style. *Pho* [พ่อ], or father, of the citizens was viewed as a merciful king. Later in Ayutthaya reigns, the divine king and his absolute power was set with meaning far from humans. However, history has usually depicted a relationship between the ruler and the people with mercifulness. “*Pho luang*” [พ่อหลวง], or father king, is often used in calling the monarch.

As a consequence, representations of royal food can be seen having supreme skill and knowledge; both art and science. The court was the place where many of the best hands from diverse groups throughout the regions gathered to work and sometimes some of them rose in their relations to the king. For instance, the Persians, the Chinese and the Mons who offered services in many royal aspects have blended their culture, as well as their cuisines, with royal values. Food specialties became not only a tasty dish, but also maximizing sensory

⁹ Sivasariyanont and Buntharikvivat, *Characters and Manners of Thai people in Westerners' perception from the Ayutthaya period – 1932*, 1980 (in Thai).

perception to the eyes, savors and textures. “Tamrap Saiyaowapa”,¹⁰ a cookbook that gathered recipes from many elite ladies, with primary contribution by a daughter of King Rama V, Phraongchaoying Yaowapongsanit [พระองค์เจ้าหญิงเยาวภาพงษ์สนธิ], supports the meanings related to royal. “Extraordinary” is always found with royal food in terms of the choices of ingredient, practices and settings. *Khao khwan* [ข้าวขวัญ], as an example, is a simple tamarind flavored rice, but astonishingly presented in triangular shape with details garnished to symbolize *Phra Sumeru* [พระสุเมรุ], the mountain which is the center of the universe in Thai cosmology. Such food is quite far from what could be used for general serving.

The court cuisine expressed concretely through *tamra* [ตำรา], or the cookbook, was first produced by an elite lady, with rational explanations of the food dishes, both socially and physically, and is more than an accumulation of recipes. *Mae Khrua Hua Pa* [แม่ครัวหัวป่าก์] by Thanphuying Plian Phaskornwong [ท่านผู้หญิงเปลี่ยน ภาสกรวงศ์] was the first *tamra* written to gather her values and competencies as a good lady inherited from her elite family and royalty.¹¹ Mrs. Isabel Beeton and her work, which are books produced for English ladies in response to social changes from the Victorian to Industrial period, was the inspiration for Thanphuying Plian. Food and household management was shared with Western values in *Mae Khrua Hua Pa*, yet there were culturally meaningful local values represented, such as a description of particular sets of food for monks, the king, nobles and commoners. This was also the first time Thai cuisine suggested standard measurements as blended with Thai ways.

The introduction page of this cookbook indicated that her food had been transferred from her respected mentor or *khru* [ครู] who was Somdet Phra Srisuriyendraborromraachinee [สมเด็จพระศรีสุริเยนทราบรมราชินี], the queen of Rama II and mother of King Rama IV. The queen is considered the iconic wife and mother of former times. The representation of her *tamra* indicates the purified royal legacy she received as linked with Ayutthaya and her Rattanakosin days. The other

¹⁰ “Tamrap Saiyaowapa” (in Thai).

¹¹ Phaskornwong, *Mae Khrua Hua Pa* (in Thai).

aspect is how she give high respect to worship her teacher. “Gratitude is the sign of a good person” is preached by Supreme Patriarch Prince Vajirayannavarorasa, and it is Thainess to appreciate the efforts and knowledge of a teacher in giving life direction, which to her is food knowledge and the *precious value* of her life. The ability to cook had much more meaning for woman in those days.

The haute flavors was later associated with commoners through ceremonies and the linkage of nobles. There are many *tamrap* [ตำรับ], or recipe books, written by both the royal families and elite women. However many of these books were produced only in a *tamrap* way. The recipes were a written list of ingredient, with or without measurement, and the notions behind each dish are not explained. The ability to cook was, moreover, a secret of each family.

The national reform in 1932 enabled the court’s skills to broaden the *foodscape* domestically and publicly. Schools for women, such as a finishing school called *rongrian kanruean* [โรงเรียนการเรือน], were founded and royal insight was given both in lecture and in practice by related royal families in the 1940s aimed at transferring the food culture for private circumstances.

Apart from transferring this knowledge through education in schools, there have been a lot of renowned Thai restaurants with relations to the court. Elite ladies shared with Chinese food-vendors who had a longer competency in the food business.

Royal food was broadened to public food spaces through some of the royal and noble families. Their food businesses were opened for commoners to experience these exquisite recipes. Even though there were commercial values imported, many restaurants with court accents run successful businesses. At the present, it is quite difficult for court style-food to achieve its value as in former days. Rare practices inhibit the transfer of not only the food, but many related concepts. In addition, such food has had to be learnt through cookbooks rather than in person. Therefore, diners have not really focused on this type of food space with the same meaning and, because of social changes, there is more alternative dining with values that are very much shaped by public space.

Modern Food System

Thai gastronomy within a commercial context evolved even in the Ayutthaya period when meals were a domestic activity only. Cooked food was sold for people traveling long distances away from home, but this was very rare. The period of national reform in 1932 was a turning point of Thai gastronomy. With the forces of industrialization which encapsulated modern concepts, people had a new paradigm of their space and time. More people spent their time in working spaces and even brought work values back to their homes, including food preferences.

More regional food from throughout the country came along with the people seeking their fortune in the big city, especially Bangkok. Gastronomic variety from parts of the country met international gastronomy, however practiced more in public spaces in this time. A modern food system, which is driven by mass production and fast concepts, has impacted Thai gastronomy since then. The Bangkok foodscape, specifically street food, has broadened through this social lens as explained by Yasmeen.¹²

The views of Thai gastronomy studied through history have many aspect of Thainess. The meanings have been contextually represented, both in terms of time and space. As Thailand is situated in a global community, local wisdom related to agriculture is dynamically gaining new meaning and the production in foodways from farm to table is aimed to serve this change.

Profiles of the Selected Food Spaces: *Sala Rim Naam* and *Nahm*

These two case studies are renowned Thai food spaces, although they have different backgrounds in the establishment of the constructed factors that have influenced their success. The information of each food space will be described according to its years of establishment.

¹² Yasmeen, *Bangkok's Foodscape*.

Sala Rim Naam at The Mandarin Oriental Hotel Bangkok

The Mandarin Oriental Hotel has been in Thailand since 1876; however it is believed by historians that the hotel was started some years earlier. The Mandarin Oriental was founded by two foreign friends who intended to provide a space for association among the international community in Thailand.

The hotel gained high honor once His Majesty King Chulalongkorn arrived with his entourage to assess the ability of the hotel to host royal guests. His Majesty was so impressed that he decided to host Crown Prince Nicholas of Russia, who became Tsar in 1894, at the Oriental in April 1891. Since then the hotel has been a place where prestige people seek perceived values in a public space, both Thai and foreigners.

The meaning of “oriental” which is sought by their customers is not only the physical sphere, but also the luxury, warmth and relaxation the hotel has attempted to provide through interaction with their guests and also through interactions among their foreign guests. However, as for its leisure and international constraints, there are standards which the hotel has to cater to precisely. While the guests are looking for “reality”, their trip starts with a need to break through their usual lives, and demands that they negotiate with each other to experience “hyper reality”. As a consequence, all meanings are constructed contextually in this space.

The hotel has gained its prominent fame as one of the best hotel in the world through its renowned hospitality and luxuriousness. Even though the hotel has been administered by foreigners – the General Manager have never been posted for any Thai – these GMs have significantly viewed Thainess is the key. Its long establishment has been viewed as an advantage, especially their strength through the staff. In this regard, the hotel has its own academy which collaborates with a university in giving degrees to their staff.

The physical setting, with over hundred years of establishment, has been regularly taken care of with details directed at social trends, yet a classical atmosphere has been taken into account. As the consequence, such a long term does not express “old”, but “timeless” instead.

The Thai restaurant, *Sala Rim Naam*, is a Thai restaurant at The Mandarin Oriental Hotel, situated next to the Chaophraya River. Within a large compound, there are parts of the restaurant both indoors and outdoors, a garden with a patio of open-air seats and a Thai cooking school. The restaurant faces the river in the design of a throne-hall outside and is very majestic inside according to the grand culture of central Siam. Inside, the dining hall is divided into two main areas. Colorful shades with golden lines are seen on the walls and the high ceiling. The dining tables are arranged into two types. High tables are available for guests who are familiar with Western dining and low tables are available for mostly Asian guests who prefer to sit on the floor.

There are Thai classical shows performed every evening, with the content of the shows explained in a pamphlet. These traditional shows depict different times in history, but most are narration of culture around the central plains. The uniforms of the staff are Thai traditional dress, with only the management wearing black jackets. A remarkable point with respect to the staff and their appearances is seen through their polished manners and etiquette. Even though the staff is aware of the deemed value of the transaction, they are helpful and friendly which encapsulates their high degree of thoughtfulness as the true host.

Thai food served in this restaurant includes many items for which international customers are aware of as Thai dishes in their usual menu back home. There are also annual traditions with food specially cooked for such occasions, such as *khao chae* or summer rice, which is a special food for *songkran* [สงกรานต์] or Thai traditional New Year in April, the hottest month of the year. The quality of the food is maintained with the use of qualified ingredients.

Sometime the food is newly created in an adaptation of Thai cuisine in cooperating with other food providers, such as in an event set up between a wine company and *Sala Rim Naam* for special invited guests from diverse food entrepreneurs in trying a set of Thai food paired with wines. The lists and practices applied include a hospitable style implemented in this special gastronomy which is aimed at commercially complementing the wine of the event.

“Chef Table” is a new service recently arranged which shows how this restaurant understands the value sought by their customers. The customer would like to interact with Thainess in a closer atmosphere and the kitchen becomes a priority for them. Even though it is not set as beautifully as in the dining hall, it serves a particular need of this type of customer. Postmodernist and an interest in “authenticity” drives this guest who is willing to pay special prices in order to be closer to the food scene. Limited seats are arranged for guests inside the kitchen area for the guests to have Thai dishes for which they have been able to view the process and practices closely in front of their eyes.



Figure 1: Interior view with Thai Classical dance at *Sala Rim Naam*. Photo courtesy of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel.



Figure 2: Exterior view of *Sala Rim Naam*.
Photo courtesy of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel.



Figure 3: Thai food served on traditional table wares at *Sala Rim Naam*.
Photo courtesy of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel.



Figure 4: Summer Rice or *Khao Chae* set served at *Sala Rim Naam*.
Photo courtesy of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel.



Figure 5: Thai cooking class at The Mandarin Oriental Hotel.
Photo courtesy of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel.



Figure 6: Sample of Thai food recommended at *Sala Rim Naam*.
Courtesy of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel.

***Nahm* at The Metropolitan Hotel Bangkok**

The Metropolitan Hotel is a prominent hotel which could represent the united values of the “world”. Representation through the physical setting is viewed as an East and West mixture in contemporary style. The hotel was opened around 2002 when its style was very new for the hotel industry in Thailand.

The hospitality style, which is their service concept, is aimed at a light touch rather than that of the usual Thai hosts. However, it is fully polished according to hotel standards in aiming to provide a perfect space for rest and the privacy of its particular group of customers.

Today, this structure has been reproduced in many places, both leisure and home. Thai people do not feel its style as trendy as it once was. However, the hotel’s service concept in specifically keeping their staff at a distance from the guests is not really familiar to Thais. Their

guests are mostly artists or related, such as writers or entertainers. There are the usual tourists, but not really the first-time visitor to Thailand.

Nahm, the Thai restaurant located in the hotel, is not constructed with the same standard as the hotel. With a limitation of having to share the same building, the restaurant was interiorly resurfaced with attempts to signify a Thai space. Even though the dining hall is not driven by a homey atmosphere, there are some physical motifs that represent Thainess. *Silalaeng* [ศิลาแลง], laterite, a kind of stone with a unique color and rough surface, is rustically formed as stone pillars to depict a historical-like space such as a ruined temple. Tableware, either *benjarong*, or five-color ceramic, clay and wooden plates, blue and white wares in style called *lai pak chee* and decorative items such as orchid flowers and jasmine garlands, are intensively used to identify a Thai table.



Figure 8: Sample of Thai food recommended at *Sala Rim Naam*.
Courtesy of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel.

The restaurant staff, since it is newly opened in Thailand, are mostly young people; however many of the beginning team were well trained and skilled previously in hospitality from five-star hotels. Their excellent communication skill and service manners accord to international standards, although they may perform reluctantly and awkwardly once combined with this restaurant standard. It can be detected that in the attempt in representing Thai characteristics through interaction with the guests there is a gap from reality.

The “Thai” content which the wait staff has to express verbally and nonverbally was studied and trained intensively in class and on the floor three months before the opening. This content was researched from Thai ways of life mainly with reference to central civilization, however most was too far from this young generation of staff for them to absorb in such a short time. However, their performance depicts all the contents need to be presented, especially in the whole picture of “politeness”, which Thai called *suphap* [สุภาพ].

The culinary practice of *Nahm* is the most remarkable aspect, which is under the supervision of Chef David Thompson and Thanongsak Yordwai, who have helped each other for more than twenty years with Thai restaurants started in Sydney, London and recently Bangkok. Chef David first tried Thai food when he was already in a food career, which so impressed him that he always remembers that “extraordinary” is the center of all Thai food characteristics. His education background in philosophy opened Thai food in a cultural way which, as an outsider in the beginning, he was able to pose several skeptical questions about Thai food and related factors to Thai people.

He decided to start trips to local parts around Thailand and spent time with local people in different groups to learn how to cook and speak Thai. His first Thai restaurant in Sydney was successful with rigid practices as what he had learnt in Thailand and it made a clear distinction between Thai food and Chinese food as perceived abroad. His refined food was not commercially rewarded as much as his fame once he was awarded a Michelin star as the first chef for Thai food. This renowned Michelin star award gained him not only attention as a Chef, but also to Thai food as a very prominent identity among world cuisines.

Aharn Thai, his Thai food book, was launched during the time he had moved to London.¹³ This book gathered notions of Thailand in various aspects, such as history and geography, presented in concrete introduction parts. In *Aharn Thai*, recipes are divided into functions in a meal composition as suggested in the legendary cook book of Thanphuying Plian Phaskornwong. Recipes are referenced mostly to ladies with values of haute cuisine. More than 40 names are quoted as references. This Thai cookbook has been translated into French and German, but has yet to have a Thai version.

Thai table manners are applied to food sets which are served according to the concepts suggested in Thanphuying Phaskornwong's book. A communal set with rice in the center is composed of dishes called *khrueng* [เครื่อง] in *samrap* [สำรับ] or set. The kitchen team is divided according to such manner.

The London location was not David Thompson's first restaurant, but it was the first named *Nahm*. The name represents Thai water culture. Because his practices rely strictly on fresh ingredients, the Michelin award pointed to the origin of natural products used in the cuisine, thus the ingredients are the highest cost. The price set is then quite expensive for Thai people. Accordingly, in the second *Nahm* in Bangkok there are still more international people than local people. Thais may know his name and restaurant from the news, such as recently in May 2012 when the restaurant was voted by international voters as one of the best fifty restaurants of the world.

Culinary practices at *Nahm* attempt to be equivalent to home meals in terms of minimizing the commercial and tourist aspects. Food lists are cyclical by seasons in order to use diverse and fresh ingredients. Ingredients which are traditionally dominant, especially for the taste of Thai food, are strictly based on availability. Chef David has often brought back neglected ingredients into not only his kitchen, but also the ecology. For instance, a root like ginger called *krathue* [กระเทียม] can only be found limitedly in the wild bush in wet areas. Since it has almost disappeared and is not really mentioned in mainstream food dishes, this plant is ignored and has slowly gone

¹³ Thompson, *Thai food*.

from foodways. As well, a sweet dish called *som chun* [ส้มชุน], heard in a King Rama II boat song, was researched and offered with *somsa* [ส้มซ่า] or a kind of rare citrus. *Somsa* is then regaining its places in gardens and in the fresh market. Cooked jasmine rice is focused on from the field and the cooking process, so that by the time it is offered in front of the guest there is an extreme output of jasmine sense to be received by the guests.

His attempts at representing Thainess have brought local values into this international space with a different identity. *Plara* [ปลาร้า], or fermented fish, and many preserved products important for Thai food, even dried shrimp, if possible, are made by the restaurant. These Thai values have penetrated the foodways with art and science that is a cultural production in this restaurant. Thai cooks on the kitchen team have different manners from other kitchen spaces. They are very discipline with food standards with an outstanding degree of Thai ways. Short-cut process and some new ingredients are viewed as offensive to their philosophy and conduct.

Even though it is subjective to analyze food by its taste, the intention of each dish can be felt even if only visually evaluated. Thanongsak is the person responsible for the artfully contributed to the food to maximize the sensory perception, especially appealing to the eyes. He has asked for advice from the Fine Art Department in reproducing the table wares, with mix versions variously used. He shared this idea in keeping his homey concept in placing *benjarong* with other wares on the same table so that it could be a commoner's meal, as well as a mixture of collections from different family generations. His skill using a knife to imitate fruits and vegetable with Thai environment is simplicity. It is clean, beautiful and full of content, such as his curvy cut of semi ripe mango to remind one of the corbels on top of a temple.



Figure 9: Example of food in sets served at *Nahm*.
 Courtesy of the Metropolitan Hotel.

Strategies in Representation of Thai Gastronomy in Thai Restaurants in Five-Star Hotels

Representation of Thainess in Thai gastronomy in *Sala Rim Naam* and *Nahm* can be analyzed with three characteristics: the physical settings, the service and the culinary practices. The terms of their group of customers and the customer's anticipation towards Thainess in different aspects and degrees regulates the representation of Thai gastronomy produced and consumed in these spaces. However, the values conveyed for the production of food in these globalization times is rapidly changing enabling “new” aspects of Thai gastronomy. For instance, the rise of a postmodern notion to consume “authenticity” represented with tourist promotion is skeptical. Too much of a formality in the interacted between host and guest, tangible and non tangible aspects, and menus with meaning in terms of flavors

of tourism are quite saturated in these spaces. The production of Thainess, far from the tourist track, is scanned and represented in all three characteristics.

The two cases show their Thai gastronomy, both alike and also differently. They have a shared representation of a high degree of Thainess through civilization gained from the central plains. Their physical setting and the service are characterized art and life, which can be very much traced to the Ayutthaya and Rattanakosin eras. However, these similar notions are depicted with different accents. While the content of royal cuisine is obviously seen at *Sala Rim Naam*, commoner’s values are more evolved at *Nahm*.

Culinary practices, as seen through the menu from *Sala Rim Naam*, depict urban preferences, while *Nahm*, even though it has attempted to base on the Royal food practices, there are many rural values constantly represented. If the service and culinary practices are perhaps in negotiating its representation, the later characteristic is prioritized. Thainess consumed and produced at *Nahm* is rigidly regulated by local wisdom, no matter the ecology or culture.

It can be seen that culinary and art is inevitably paired, which very often welcomes the fluidity of Thainess, such as fusion and molecular cuisine. “Newness” is then created sometime to cater purposely to a food event, not for permanent practice by *Sala Rim Naam*. For instance, foie gras is added to Thai dishes such as *tom yam kung*, spicy prawn soup, as well as other dishes. The nutty and creamy touch of foie gras is aimed to minimize the fresh flavors of the soup; herbal, tangy savors with aromatic fragrance and paired with wine.

Service, though intangible, represents Thainess very well. The service provided with Thai hospitality at *Sala Rim Naam* is remarkable. Their cultivated manners through codes of human interaction according to Thai lifestyle are significantly well planned based on beliefs constructed through religion and culture. Hospitable Thainess in this space is then very natural and felt less invented. This characteristic is owned to long establishment of the hotel and the norm is constructed in the community.

As a consequence, proper manners are learnt and performed. The guests do not feel an invented interaction, but that it is naturally polite

and modest. Their continuity in working provides for confronting ways when sudden and urgent problems arise with less tension, at least cross cultural ideas among internationalities are learnt.

Nahm has attempted to present Thainess in its culinary practice. The concern in the sensory aspect of Thai food is maximized by local fresh ingredients which are herbs and vegetables only available in Thailand. Some types of greens which offer too modern or too generic aspects as seen in tourism, or too commercial, would be strictly prohibited.

The representation of haute characteristic of royal cuisine has been undertaken with carefulness as it easily welcomes controversy. So such refined concepts are produced with representations of “politeness” instead. There are overlapping meanings of royal cuisine and commoners which are depicted, such as types of dishes, details in cooking, seasonings, but not the decoration. The mixture of such food is served harmoniously with foods from rural places around the country.

This research confirms the works of many authors that “food is about culture and culture is about food.” Food could portray life and likewise. The circuit of culture is also confirmed that Thai food cannot resist change. Globalization enables Thai gastronomy to be a non static culture.

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