“They like it spicy!” Spice and Authenticity of Ethnic Thai Food in the U.S.

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“I can tell sometimes when a customer has had Thai food before, ‘cause they like it spicy!”¹ A mild comment, made by Somsanith Sithisack, manager of the restaurant 1st of Thai in Faribault, MN, makes reference to a common account of Thai cuisine: its spice is not for the inexperienced or weak of palette. In fact, the menu of 1st of Thai notes in three separate locations “We can omit (remove) any MSG or peppers from any meal on our menu. (including spice).”² The fact that foods off the menu are served spiced and customers may request milder alternatives signifies one interpretation of how Thai cuisine ought to be eaten and, if Sithisack’s comments are an indication, who ought to eat it as such.

In “On Culinary Authenticity,” author Arjun Appadurai notes, “Authenticity measures the degree to which something is more or less what it ought to be. It is thus a norm of some sort. But is it an immanent norm, emerging somehow from the cuisine itself? Or is it an external norm, reflecting some imposed gastronomic standard?”³ Put simply, is authenticity derived from food or prescribed by people? The question of authenticity is a contentious topic in the field of food studies from which consensus has yet to emerge. The very notion of authenticity is suspect for some food scholars, who argue that use of the term is unproductive or even

² “1st of Thai Restaurant Menu.” Faribault, MN. (2011).
harmful. Nonetheless, the term is widely used by critics to make claims about foods and peoples. Ethnic foods, in particular, are subject to this standard. Scholarship in food studies has examined the experience of immigrants to the United States and researched the ways in which identity and authenticity are variously defined and negotiated. Debate has thus focused on the interaction between ethnic groups and foodways in the United States, yet, as we will see, questions of authenticity of cuisines can also be global in scope.

One perspective on the nature of authenticity is derived from the concept of culinary tourism. Author Lucy M. Long, writing in the appropriately titled book “Culinary Tourism,” defines the term to mean “the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of an other.” Thus, culinary tourists visit restaurants and sample traditions and recipes of ethnic groups other than their own and, importantly, take these experiences to represent the groups themselves. It is for these tourists, writes Jennie Germann Molz, author of “Tasting an Imagined Thailand,” that the term authenticity is significant. Yet, what tourists perceive as “authentic” is almost always “staged,” as in the case of chefs who “[D]on’t really eat what they cook,” a phenomenon noted by Somsanith Sitisack, manager of the restaurant 1st of Thai in Faribault, MN. Thus, “authentic” ethnic food becomes a part

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8 Sitisack, “Oral History.”
of the performance of a group’s ethnic identity, though this “staged” representation may not correspond to traditional recipes or practices.\(^9\)

Thai restaurants offer a particularly useful venue to examine the relationship between authenticity, tourism, and tradition in the United States. The case of Thai food is an interesting one because, as compared to Chinese or even Indian food, few Americans can identify ingredients or practices unique to the cuisine.\(^10\) Indeed, according to Molz, the only element that is consistently associated with Thai cuisine is spice. “More than any other ingredient, the chili pepper has come to stand for Thai-ness. Thai restaurants... use the chili and spiciness as measures of authenticity.”\(^11\) Thus, for many Americans Thai food is essentialized to a flavor rather than a known combination of ingredients. This idea is reiterated by Sithisack, who says simply, “[W]hat’s unique about Thai food is that it’s spicy.”\(^12\) That Sithisack should cite spice as the exclusive quality of Thai cuisine is interesting, especially given that, before founding 1st of Thai, his father worked as a chef in Vietnamese and Chinese restaurants where spices were presumably abundant. To this end, Sithisack’s observation may comment on the relationship of spice to a cuisine’s authenticity, which may indeed be more evident in the case of Thai food.

A New York Times article published recently addresses the controversy surround “authentic” Thai food. The article features David Thompson, an Australian-born chef whose London-based Thai restaurant, Nahm, has been so successful that

\(^12\) Sithisack, “Oral History.”
he recently opened a second venue in Thailand’s capital, Bangkok.\textsuperscript{13} The restaurant’s claim to authenticity, as well as Thompson’s credentials as a “widely acclaimed expert on Thai food,” has drawn sharp criticism from many ethnic Thais. The Times article describes the prevailing notion that foreigners cannot reproduce authentic Thai food, “because they did not grow up wandering through vast, wet markets filled with the cornucopia of Thai produce, or pulling on the apron strings of grandmothers and maids who imparted the complex and subtle balance of ingredients required for the perfect curry or chili paste. Foreigners, Thais believe, cannot stomach the spices that fire the best Thai dishes.”\textsuperscript{14} This last sentence, in particular, reiterates the idea that spice is in some way essential to authentic Thai cuisine, an element to which foreign cooks are averse. However, the article goes on to note that, “Mr. Thompson may have the distinction as the only foreigner in spice-crazed Thailand to be accused of liking his food too hot.”\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, as Nutchanand Osathanond, an expert on Thai food who writes in Paris and Bangkok, reportedly said of Thompson’s cooking, “I can’t tell you why it’s not authentic, but it’s not. Some tastes are too pronounced – and it’s drowning in spice.”\textsuperscript{16} Osathanond’s comment reveals a paradox central to perceptions of Thai cuisine: it must be spicy to be authentic, but spice alone does not make it so.

Although spice content may not be an exact proxy for authenticity in evaluation of Thai food, there is evidence that these factors are nonetheless

\textsuperscript{13} Thomas Fuller. "An Australian Reinterprets Thai Cuisine, but Some Thais Say Something Is Lost." \textit{The New York Times}, September 27, 2010., 4
\textsuperscript{14} Fuller. "An Australian Reinterprets Thai Cuisine,” 4.
\textsuperscript{15} Fuller. "An Australian Reinterprets Thai Cuisine,” 4.
\textsuperscript{16} Fuller. "An Australian Reinterprets Thai Cuisine,” 4.
associated in the opinions of many people, ethnically Thai and not. Moreover, this relationship is reinforced by culinary tourism, which gives consumers a cursory “ethnic” experience. Frequent patrons of Thai restaurants may learn about distinctive ingredients and practices of Thai cuisine such as banana leaves and peanuts and the use of iron silverware. Yet for many Americans today, spice is an essential element of “authentic” Thai cuisine.

Bibliography


