

# **IMAGES OF THAI CUISINE AND THAI RESTAURANT AMONG TOURISTS IN THE ASEAN MARKET: A CASE STUDY OF LAOS AND CAMBODIA**

by

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### **ABSTRACT**

Presently, Thai cuisine has become an international phenomenon, with countless restaurants now offering it, from Eastern to Western regions. The Thai Food Business tends to expand increasingly further as the government is promoting Thai food to the global and to the ASEAN markets under its 'Kitchen of the World' campaign. This research is a part of the research project "Thai Food Business Model in ASEAN Markets: A Case Study of Thailand, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Socialist Kingdom of Cambodia". This paper focuses on the tourists' opinions toward the image of Thai cuisine and Thai restaurants in Laos (Vientiane, Vangvieng, Luang Prabang) and Cambodia (Siem Reap, Phnom Penh). Survey research was utilized to collect data from a sample of 400 tourists in each country with multi-stage sampling: quota sampling to select restaurant as a primary unit and followed by convenience sampling to select tourists. The findings showed the overall images of Thai cuisine and Thai restaurants in term of hygiene and sanitation in ASEAN market were quite good. The first 3 items of Thai cuisine image revealed good images for good taste and flavor, fresh and good quality of raw materials, and fine fruit and vegetable carving with beautiful dish presentation and colorful respectively. The first 3 items of the Thai restaurant image showed good images were personal hygiene of servers, clean guest toilets and smell of detergent, and spotless glassware and linen respectively. Restaurant entrepreneurs should concentrate on food safety and personal hygiene. Thai food restaurant in ASEAN market should be promoted in a "Thai image", harmonizing Thai food and Thai culture.

### **KEYWORDS**

Thai Cuisine, Thai Restaurant, ASEAN Market, Food Image

### **INTRODUCTION**

Presently, Thai cuisine has become an international phenomenon, with countless restaurants now offering it, from Eastern to Western regions. The Thai Food Business tends to expand increasingly further as the Thai government is promoting Thai food to the global and to the ASEAN markets under its 'Kitchen of the World' campaign. According to the 2007 Thailand, department of export promotion data, the figure of Thai restaurants overseas existed was greater than 11,800 distributed around the world, almost a half established in the USA and Canada (5,535) followed by Europe (2,697), Asia (1,755), Australia and New Zealand (1,585), and Central East and Africa (261). This is evident as Thai food and Thai cuisine now expanded in everywhere, the highest increasing rate was at 106% in Africa followed by 72% in Asia and 64% in Central East respectively (Department of Export Promotion, 2011).

Undoubtedly, Thai food is endorsed as being internationally popular cuisine. It is ranked at number four after Italian, French, and Chinese by western respondents when asked to the name ethnic cuisines (Sunanta, 2005). It is also ranked six behind Italian, French, Japanese, Chinese and Indian for the question, "what are respondents' favorite's cuisines?" Today, Thai cuisine is recognized internationally as a unique, healthy food choice because of its perceived nutrition value (Sukalamala & Boyce, 2007). Unsurprisingly, the number of Thai restaurants in foreign countries continuing booming not only in the western countries, large cities but spreading vary fast even in developing countries,

small towns. Nevertheless, customers select their restaurants of choice based on many factors, even though Thai food is well accepted by international customers. Furthermore, in many present-day hospitality environments, the consumers' ultimate perception of the meal experience may not necessarily start with their palate, or in attaining satisfaction through the service quality (Alando & O'Neill, 2010). Although food quality and food type are identified as significant variables in restaurant choice, the restaurant's atmosphere and its style can be differential elements in consumers' ultimate decision to patronise one restaurant over another (Auty, 1992). In this regard, as partly of the research project "Thai Food Business Model in ASEAN Markets: A Case Study of Thailand, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Socialist Kingdom of Cambodia", this paper focused on particular images of Thai cuisine and Thai restaurant in aspect of physical evidence (hygiene & sanitation) can have on tourists in ASEAN market i.e. Laos (Vientiane, Vangvieng, Luang Prabang) and Cambodia (Siem Reap, Phnom Penh).

Towards ASEAN Economic Community in 2015, The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) is the next step of economic integration transforming ASEAN into a single market and production base by 2015. The economic integration goals will include the elimination of tariffs, free professional movement, capital and a faster customs clearance procedure. Free Trade Area (FTAs) will be a key strategy for ASEAN to gain greater market access into trading partners and to attract foreign direct investments to ASEAN. AEC will increase regional economic prosperity and stability and reduce the development gaps among members (ASEAN, 2012). The current situation of Thai restaurant business especially in Laos and Cambodia revealed the important factors influencing foreign investment in these two countries: First, the governments' policies similarly have investment support and promotion privileges particularly tourism and other business concerned beside free-market policies, both foreign and local investors and their business activities are accorded equal rights within the free-market system. Second, the number of tourist increases evidently whereas the number of quality restaurants (and other infrastructures) is rather inadequate. Third, the higher potential of Thai food investors is competitive position in ASEAN. Last one, the other factors affecting overall business environment such as law/regulations, political uncertainty and government stability, communication and labor force are well ongoing ASEAN community (Gulasirima and Yambunjong, 2011).

As brief reviewing above, in situation of free trade and increasing of the tourists number in ASEAN markets its interesting how to meet the niche market to establish and implement Thai food restaurant in ASEAN market in particular Laos and Cambodia. This paper seeks to answer the question: what particular images of Thai cuisine and Thai restaurant can affect on local and international tourists. The findings would be advantage alternatively for Thai restaurant entrepreneurs' investment based on tourist expectations.

## METHODOLOGY

The information concerning tourists' opinions was obtained by surveying in two countries i.e. Laos and Cambodia. The field work took places purposely in capital cities (Vientiane, Phnom Penh) and tourism cities (Vangvieng, Luang Prabang, Siem Reap) of these two countries in September-October 2011. The quantitative research provided to the target population of consumers, in which data concerned images of Thai food and Thai restaurant. The data were gathered by questionnaires from a sample of 400 tourists both local and foreign tourists in each country. The multi-stage sampling was used to select a sample of tourists: quota sampling to select restaurant as a primary unit and followed by convenience sampling to select tourists. The sample sized for estimating proportion of infinite population at 95% confidence interval and 5% error (Cooper & Pamela, 2006) were determined.

The questionnaire was adapted from literature review of Andrews (2008) and Delfakis et.al (1992). The questionnaire was divided into two sections: (i) respondent characteristics by check list multiple choices and (ii) images of Thai food and Thai restaurant attitude were measured by a 7-point Likert scale (1-strongly disagree to 7-strongly agree). Each questionnaire was coded by location. All statistical analyses were performed using the computer program by determined frequency, percentage, mean and SD.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSION

### Profiles of respondents in Laos and Cambodia

In both countries, most of respondents were female (54.50%, 55.00%), aged less than 25 years old (47.50%, 47.00%), single (70.00%, 65.25), educated lower than bachelor degree (45.00%, 50.00%), had revenue less US\$ 450 (32.25%, 44.75%), respected Buddhism (46.75%, 59.25%), and hold Loa and Cambodian nationality (44.5%, 52.50%). Whereas customer's occupation and travel characteristic were different i.e. 20.75% respondents in Laos were student, whilst 36.75% respondents in Cambodian worked as housewife. 38.75% tourists who visited Laos were backpacker but

in Cambodia tourists accompanied with family (38.00%). Almost all of them (98.25%, 94.75%) ever eaten Thai food. Style of Thai restaurants selected, the highest percentage was Modern Thai/Casual dining (56.31%, 33.56%) followed by Fast dining/ Fast food (23.89, 30.80%) and the rest was Classic/Fine dining, Corner/Kiosk and other. The profiles of all tourists are presented in Table1.

This study highlighted an interesting finding that majority of target customer of Thai restaurants in both countries were local residents. Because of changing society in Laos and Cambodia especially in capital and tourism cities have impact on consumer behavior and their life-styles. Nowadays local people had dining-out more and adopted international culture including cuisine. Most of Thai restaurants existing in these two countries were small and medium-sized with Thai style decoration. Many of those were casual dining, fast casual and family style restaurants provided varieties of Thai menus with food portions moderately priced. In actual fact, most travelers tended to select these restaurants.

**TABLE 1**  
**RESPONDENTS' INFORMATION**

Sample personal information	Laos		Cambodia	
	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage
<b>1. Gender</b>				
Male	182	45.50	180	45.00
Female	218	54.50	220	55.00
<b>2. Age</b>				
Less than 25 years old	190	47.50	188	47.00
25-34 years old	110	27.50	130	32.50
35-44 years old	47	11.75	50	12.50
45-54 years old	29	7.25	21	5.25
55-64 years old	20	5.00	10	2.50
More than 64 years old	4	1.00	1	0.25
<b>3. Marital Status</b>				
Single	280	70.00	261	65.25
Married/Living together	103	25.75	129	32.25
Divorced/Separated/Widowed	17	4.25	10	2.50
<b>4. Level of Education</b>				
Lower than a Bachelor degree	180	45.00	200	50.00
Bachelor degree	157	39.25	145	36.25
Higher than a Bachelor degree	63	15.75	55	13.75
<b>5. Occupation</b>				
Professionals	83	20.75	81	20.25
Administrative / Managerial	44	11.00	42	10.50
Entrepreneurs	28	7.00	29	7.25
Commercial personnel	10	2.50	12	3.00
Government / State enterprise officers	25	6.25	9	2.25
Laborers production	28	7.00	29	7.25
Agricultural workers	2	0.50	13	3.25
Housewives	49	12.25	147	36.75
Students	108	27.00	13	3.25
Retired / Unemployed	12	3.00	10	2.50
Others	22	5.50	15	3.75
<b>6. Monthly Household Income</b>				
Lower than US\$ 450	129	32.25	179	44.75
US\$ 450 – 899	43	10.75	51	12.75
US\$ 900 – 1,349	43	10.75	53	13.25
US\$ 1,350 - 1,799	32	8.00	33	8.25
US\$ 1,800 – 2,249	37	9.25	19	4.75
US\$ 2,250 - 2,699	21	5.25	17	4.25
US\$ 2,700 – 3,149	15	3.75	8	2.00
US\$ 3,150 - 3,599	22	5.50	10	2.50
US\$ 3,600 and over	58	14.50	30	7.50

<b>7. Religion</b>				
Buddhism	187	46.75	237	59.25
Christ	111	27.75	100	25.00
Islam	5	1.25	4	1.00
Hinduism	1	0.25	7	1.75
Jewish	8	2.00	2	0.50
Others	88	22.00	50	12.50
<b>8. Nationality</b>				
Thai	3	0.75	1	0.25
Cambodian	0	0.00	210	52.50
Lao	178	44.50	5	1.25
French	20	5.00	13	3.25
Asian	11	2.75	32	8.00
European	125	31.25	109	27.25
Others	63	15.75	30	7.50
<b>9. Travel Characteristics</b>				
With Family	145	36.25	153	38.25
With Group Tour	23	5.75	47	11.75
Business Tour	12	3.00	23	5.75
Backpacker Tourist	155	38.75	110	27.50
Others	65	16.25	67	16.75
<b>10. Thai Foods' Experience</b>				
Ever eaten	393	98.25	379	94.75
Never	7	1.75	21	5.25
<b>11. Style of Thai Restaurant</b>				
Classic Fine Dining	25	8.53	68	23.53
Casual Dining	165	56.31	97	33.56
Fast Casual/Fast Food	70	23.89	89	30.80
Corner/Kiosk	23	7.85	23	7.96
Others	10	3.41	12	4.15
<b>Total</b>	<b>293</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>289</b>	<b>100.00</b>

### Images of Thai Cuisine and Thai restaurant among tourists in Laos and Cambodia

The overall mean of Thai cuisine and Thai restaurant images in both countries were rather high ( $\bar{x} = 5.20$ ,  $SD=1.12$ ;  $\bar{x} = 4.96$ ,  $SD=0.99$ ;  $\bar{x} = 5.11$ ,  $SD=1.39$ ;  $\bar{x} = 4.95$ ,  $SD=1.04$ ). This study indicated that Thai food and Thai restaurant images are well accepted among tourists in these two countries.

By examining each component of the 'Image of Thai cuisine' on tourists in two countries, the results showed that four components were apparent i.e. good taste & flavor ( $\bar{x} = 5.57$ ,  $SD=1.49$ ;  $\bar{x} = 5.40$ ,  $SD=1.44$ ), fresh and good quality of raw materials ( $\bar{x} = 5.44$ ,  $SD=1.35$ ;  $\bar{x} = 4.97$ ,  $SD=1.45$ ), fine fruit and vegetable carving with beautiful dish presentation & colorful ( $\bar{x} = 5.39$ ,  $SD=1.50$ ;  $\bar{x} = 4.93$ ,  $SD=1.46$ ), and unique recipe & cooking method identity ( $\bar{x} = 5.31$ ,  $SD=1.44$ ;  $\bar{x} = 4.94$ ,  $SD=1.38$ ) respectively (see Table2). Customers clearly expressed that Thai foods have distinctive flavor with good quality of raw materials, unique decoration and exotic cooking method. Lertputtarak (2012) reported that tourists perceived the Thai food image as; a good cultural experience, unique serving style, delicious, nourishing food, and exotic cooking method.

In examining each component of the 'Image of hygiene and sanitation of Thai restaurant' toward tourists in two countries, three components were evident i.e. personal hygiene of servers ( $\bar{x} = 5.73$ ,  $SD=1.43$ ;  $\bar{x} = 5.36$ ,  $SD=1.39$ ), clean guest toilets and the smell of detergent ( $\bar{x} = 5.43$ ,  $SD=1.76$ ;  $\bar{x} = 5.18$ ,  $SD=1.61$ ), and spotless glassware and linen ( $\bar{x} = 5.30$ ,  $SD=1.62$ ;  $\bar{x} = 4.99$ ,  $SD=1.39$ ) respectively (see Table2). The result of this study was supported by Leach et al. (2001), who found that hygiene factors of eating place such as personal hygiene; cleanliness of equipment, surfaces and premises; and temperature control of food were of paramount importance. Similar to this study's results, Aksoydan (2007) also found that the most important influences on dining out choice factors are hygienic factors, primarily of cleanliness, including cleanliness of restaurant, food, china and cutlery, service personal, toilet and lavatory and kitchen. Andrew (2008) stated that sanitation and hygiene are predominant criteria for a quest's choice of a restaurant in particular hygienic food and the cleanliness of the environment. Auty (1992) found that food type and quality were the most frequently cited variables, regardless of the occasion for dining out, but image and atmosphere or style were critical in the final choice between restaurants serving a similar quality and type of food.

**TABLE 2**  
**MEAN AND SD OF IMAGES OF THAI CUISINE AND THAI RESTAURANT**

Images	Laos					Cambodia				
	n	$\bar{x}$	SD	Level	Ranking	n	$\bar{x}$	SD	Level	Ranking
Thai Cuisine image:										
1. Good Taste & Flavor	395	5.57	1.49	High	1	400	5.40	1.44	High	1
2. Good Nutrition & medicinal Thai food	391	4.87	1.57	Rather high	10	400	4.87	1.25	Rather high	8
3. Unique recipe & cooking method Identity	392	5.31	1.44	High	4	400	4.94	1.38	Rather high	4
4. Fine fruit and vegetable carving with beautiful dish presentation & colorful	395	5.39	1.50	High	3	400	4.93	1.46	Rather high	5
5. Thai food culture and specific serving method	389	5.04	1.51	Rather high	7	400	4.75	1.50	Rather high	10
6. Variety of menus	389	5.22	1.48	Rather high	6	400	4.88	1.47	Rather high	7
7. Fresh and good quality of raw materials	393	5.44	1.35	High	2	400	4.97	1.45	Rather high	2
8. Clean food and safety	392	4.94	1.62	Rather high	9	400	4.82	1.49	Rather high	9
9. Thai service style with Thai cutlery and equipment	382	4.99	1.51	Rather high	8	400	4.89	1.38	Rather high	6
10.Others	174	5.30	1.56	High	5	257	4.96	1.51	Rather high	3
Overall image of Thai cuisine	395	5.20	1.12	Rather high	-	400	4.96	0.99	Rather high	-
Thai Restaurant Image:										
1. Personal hygiene of servers	395	5.73	1.43	High	1	400	5.36	1.39	High	1
2. Spotless glassware and linen	391	5.30	1.62	Rather high	3	400	4.99	1.39	Rather high	4
3. Polished silverware	392	4.98	1.83	High	6	400	4.69	1.51	Rather high	7
4. Handling glasses and cutlery log the base	395	4.95	1.70	High	7	400	5.04	1.42	Rather high	3
5. Clean menu cards	389	4.98	1.72	Rather high	5	400	4.83	1.52	Rather high	6
6. Warm hand towels before meals Least important	389	4.36	2.13	Rather high	8	400	4.58	1.67	Rather high	8
7. Clean guest toilets and the smell of detergent	393	5.43	1.76	High	2	400	5.18	1.61	Rather high	2
8. Well-maintained furniture	392	5.04	1.75	Rather high	4	400	4.93	1.57	Rather high	5
Overall image of Thai restaurant	395	5.11	1.39	Rather high	-	400	4.95	1.04	Rather high	-

## CONCLUSION

Restaurant entrepreneurs should concentrate on food safety and personal hygiene. Thai food restaurant in ASEAN market should be promoted in a “Thai image”, harmonizing Thai food and Thai culture. In competitive marketplace of tourism, an effective marketing strategy can attract new visitors while maintain local customers especially in low season of tourism. Accordingly, Thai restaurant has been increasing continuously as well as customers’ demanding, the duty of both Thai government and private sectors to promote and encourage all enterprises including in abroad continually. Hence, the entrepreneurs have to raise their productions up to meet international standardization. Consequently, potential of Thai food restaurant could be the first top of ASEAN market in future soon.

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