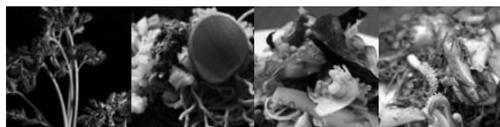


# bonfire of the AUTHENTICITIES

THE CONTROVERSIAL INFLUX OF FOREIGN CHEFS MAKING THAI FOOD HAS FORCED LOCALS AND FOREIGNERS TO THINK LONG AND HARD ABOUT THEIR BELOVED CUISINE, REPORTS **TIM FOOTMAN**

**I**N THE EARLY 1960S WHEN SKINNY British kids were getting to grips with the sounds of African-American music a question often asked of them was: “Can white men sing the blues?” The implication was that, however talented a musician you might be, if you were a Caucasian from London or Liverpool (or indeed New York or Los Angeles) you were unable to draw on the same experience that informed the art of a black person from Memphis, Atlanta or Chicago.



Spool forward half a century and much the same question is being asked in the restaurants of Thailand. In the past 20 years or so Thai food has become immensely popular around the world. Not only are there Thai restaurants in most major cities, but many amateur Western cooks have been taking advantage of the availability of Thai and other Asian ingredients and attempting to recreate their favourite dishes. *The Principles of Thai Cookery*, a comprehensive tome by leading food expert ML Sirichalerm Svasti, also known as Chef McDang, and Australian chef David

Thompson’s vast, exhaustive *Thai Street Food* have encouraged even more people to dabble with coconut milk and phrik khee nu. “Can far-ang cook tod mun?” is a loaded query that raises all sorts of issues about authenticity, ethnicity, patriotism, exploitation, cultural tourism and maybe even the very nature of Thailand itself. This is not just about curry.

For a foreigner to attempt to concoct a Thai meal in his or her home country can be regarded as a compliment. For the same foreigner to open for business in Thailand itself can be seen as a provocation. Matters came to a head in the middle of 2010, around the time that Thompson opened a branch of his London restaurant, Nahm, at Bangkok’s Metropolitan Hotel. He was reported to have claimed that Thai cooking was decaying and that he was on a mission to reintroduce Thais to their heritage. One Thai food writer claimed that Thompson was “slapping the faces of Thai people.” A proud nation that successfully warded off European colonists throughout its history seemed to be falling for the charms of foreign annexation in that most sensitive region: the kitchen. “I could understand the umbrage,” sighs Thompson, “if the quotations were true or in context.” Far from insulting Thais, his intention he assures is to celebrate the kingdom’s cuisine and introduce diners – Thai and foreign – to dishes they might never have encountered before.

And this is part of the problem. Thompson’s meticulous research, some of it based on 19th-century texts, has unearthed recipes that are a surprise even to devotees of Thai cuisine. This invites some to question Nahm’s authenticity, a word that provokes a raised eyebrow from the chef. “Authenticity isn’t some immutable holy grail,” he says. “I want to stay true to the

spirit of Thai cuisine, but above all my duty is to make delicious food for my customers.” And the customers appear to appreciate the effort, not really caring whether the chef comes from Sydney or Suphan Buri. Bruised, but at the same time energised by the controversies, Thompson muses, “It’s probably best to keep silent from now on. I should just keep doing what I do.”

Although he attracted much attention when Nahm opened in Bangkok, Thompson wasn’t the first of the current wave of foreign chefs. That honour goes to one of his protégés at Nahm in London, fellow-Australian Dylan Jones, who in 2009 opened Bo.Lan on Sukhumvit Soi 26 with his wife Duangporn Songvisava. Jones is more of a purist than his mentor, working faithfully from antique texts and refusing to tone down spicier options for more cautious palates. He too

has been outspoken about some of the wrong turnings that Thai food had made, such as the appearance of evaporated milk in tom yum. As he said shortly after he opened his restaurant: “Today many people – Thais and foreigners alike – believe this opaque stuff really is tom yum, and are perplexed when they receive the genuine article.”

Jones clearly wasn’t out to reinvent Thai cuisine; he simply wanted to ensure that Thai people were informed about their own history and heritage. But this was not enough for some. As one Bangkok foodie remarked in an online discussion, the idea of an Australian cooking Thai food “is the antithesis of authenticity and is wrong from the root of its inception.” Jones’ reaction to this verbal assault was measured. “I’ve got no problem with people saying they don’t like my

**CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW RIGHT**  
David Thompson has ruffled the feathers of some Thai commentators who regard him as a culinary interloper; Nahm’s salak in perfumed syrup; lemongrass salad with prawns, squid and pork; blue crab curry



food,” he says. “Everybody’s tastes are different, and we can all learn from constructive criticism. But I don’t understand people disliking my food on principle, without having tasted it. When I saw that comment, I invited the guy to come to the restaurant, but as far as I know he hasn’t shown up.”

Perhaps Thompson and Jones have provoked the wrath of Thai culinary chauvinists – and their eager non-Thai defenders – because they are attempting, to varying degrees, to reconnect the cuisine to its roots. Again, the dread word “authenticity” crops up, to the extent that it was the subject of a sometimes fiery panel discussion at Bangkok’s Foreign Correspondents Club in December 2010. The problem was that while many people agreed that authentic Thai cuisine was a fine aspiration, there was no agreement as to what it was. Thais in the audience argued for their own slice of authenticity, but it seemed to

differ according to how old they were or what part of the country they came from. Perhaps all the defenders of Thai food are taking up cudgels on behalf of differing authenticities. Others argued that, if we were to follow the logic of the authenticity fundamentalists, then any borrowings from Chinese or Indian cuisines would have to be barred from Thai kitchens. Chillis, introduced in the 17th century by Portuguese traders would be banned; even that tourist staple phad thai, popularised in its present form in the 1930s, could be deemed inauthentic. Appropriately, given the subject matter, much heat was generated.

One of the slightly singed panellists at the FCCT event was American Jarrett Wrisley, a journalist and also the proprietor of the bar-cum-restaurant Soul Food Mahanakorn, which opened on Thonglor last year. While his menu is based on no-nonsense snacks and street food, he makes

**CLOCKWISE  
FROM BELOW**

**LEFT**  
Soul Food Mahanakorn’s khao soi, miang kham; kaeng hang lay; Jarrett Wrisley, journalist and proprietor of Soul Food



**CLOCKWISE**

**FROM TOP**

Dylan Jones, pioneer of farang chefs in Bangkok; Bo.Lan amuse bouche; squid with cha kram (Thai samphire); lohn (fermented rice dip)

no grand claims for its culinary heritage. “The trope of authenticity is completely illusory,” he declares. “Food bloggers scour Asia trying to be the first person to discover the most authentic treatment of a noodle dish that is by definition a hybrid of cooking styles and traditions, only to plant their digital flag and label it authentic! It’s a farce.”

Indeed, he points out that any cuisine that stuck too closely to authenticity would become depressingly samey. “People in Thailand go to small street stalls precisely because they are inauthentic. They add a certain step or ingredient that distinguishes their own treatment of one dish from all the others surrounding them, and in doing so make it better. Thai food itself is a hybrid cuisine, constantly evolving, borrowing from the cooking traditions of India, China, Burma, Malaysia, so how is that authentic? There is no criterion for authenticity, save for one person’s opinion. And really, I think people need to find other ways of describing good food. Traditional is a much better descriptor than authentic, if you’re after something that has remained unchanged for some time.”

One of Wrisley’s fellow panellists, Dr Kanit Muntarbhorn, combines these two attributes in his Five-Decade Traditional and Authentic Test, which relies on the existence of written or printed evidence to determine whether or not a particular dish can truly be identified as Thai. But even Kanit is forced to accept that recipes change

*“There is no criterion for authenticity, save for one person’s opinion.”* **Jarrett Wrisley**

over time, a process he describes a “Thai food evolution”; for example, most modern massaman curries will include lemongrass and cloves, which may not have been present in 19th-century incarnations. An aberration – such as Dylan Jones’s dreaded evaporated milk – may become the standard, achieving some measure of authenticity with time.

It’s doubtful though, whether Henrik Yde Andersen’s interpretations of Thai food will ever become standard. Andersen, with his Thai partner Lertchai Treetawatchaiwong set up Kiin Kiin in Copenhagen, the second Thai restaurant (after Nahm) to earn a Michelin star. In 2010 he opened a Bangkok branch, Sra Bua at the Kempinski hotel, which is now under the day-to-day control of Thai chef Pavita Saechao. Whereas Thompson and Jones base their cooking on old texts and almost-lost traditions, Andersen takes matters in completely the opposite direction, absorbing techniques and influences from the trailblazers of molecular gastronomy, such as Ferran Adria and Heston Blumenthal. His dishes still have that

**CLOCKWISE  
FROM FAR  
RIGHT**

Henrik Yde  
Andersen of Kiin  
Kiin; Pavita  
Saechao, the new  
chef of Sra Bua at  
Siam Kempinski  
Hotel Bangkok;  
Sra Bua's  
innovative curry  
in a flower pot;  
red curry with  
lychee foam

quintessence of Thai-ness, but would be unrecognisable to any self-styled culinary purist. Red curry is served with lychee foam; pork rinds come on a gust of smoke that seems to drag you out of the posh dining room and deposit you in some grimy sub-soi – but in a good way.

“We do have to explain to people, especially tourists, that they won't be getting a conventional Thai meal,” says Andersen, with laconic understatement. “But I hope there are enough elements within the dishes to suggest a link with traditional cuisine.” And he tries to tap into a philosophy of food that transcends any rules about specific ingredients or cooking methods. “Thai food is really about cooking from the heart, for friends and family,” he continues. “Many top chefs cook for their own egos, not for their guests. We hope the combination of food, service and ambience ensure that people enjoy themselves, which is the most important thing.” Andersen can understand why the activities of his fellow farang chefs have stirred emotions: “I can't make classic Thai food,” he says, “and there are 65 million Thais who could tell you that. But I don't see why we should be targeted this way. Why don't they hammer McDonald's or those other guys? That's the enemy.” A fair point: while highbrow critics were tying themselves in knots over whether David Thompson should be allowed to sully the heritage of massaman curry, Thai teenagers – the inheritors of the culinary tradition – were queuing three-deep at Siam Paragon for the questionable privilege of chowing down on Krispy Kreme doughnuts.

And of course there are double standards at work. If the likes of Thompson and Jones are expected – purely on the basis of nationality and ethnicity – to remain in a particular culinary box, surely the same rules should apply to Thai chefs. When a renowned Thai chef such as Pongtawat Ian Chalermkitchai puts together a pulled pork sandwich at Hyde and Seek, or exciting newcomer Chatree Kachorklin combines prawns, shaved truffles and caramelised hazelnuts at La Table de Tee, are they making Thai food, but not letting on? And where do we place chefs of mixed heritage, such as Jai Lafon at Le Pre Grill? Would he be allowed to cook Thai food on alternate days?

Of course, Thais are by no means unique in trying to preserve the sanctity of their culinary traditions. Patriotic French gourmets will quickly try to change the subject when you point out that their cuisine owes a massive debt to the Florentine Catherine de Medici, who brought her chefs along when she married King Henri II in the 1540s. The Italians need not look so smug, though. They wouldn't have pasta if it weren't for the Arabs who brought durum wheat to Europe in the seventh century; and the Chinese were enjoying noodles 2,500 years before that. Even the seemingly self-sufficient Japanese kitchen owes a debt to outsiders: tempura, for example, was the gift of Portuguese missionaries.

When the Thompson controversy erupted

Bob Halliday, an American writer who has lived in Thailand for over 40 years, said that Thompson's pronouncements were equivalent to Osama bin Laden setting himself up as an authority on Catholicism. There was an element of hyperbole in his analysis, but he was right to suggest that this was about something far bigger than food. The notion of a sacrosanct national cuisine implies a single, coherent, united culture, a myth to which many countries aspire, with limited success. Recent political upheavals have left many Thais deeply sensitive to the inequalities and differences of opinion within the kingdom. At such a fraught time any perceived affront to Thai food can be interpreted as an attack on the very essence of Thainess.

This is why Jarrett Wrisley tries to avoid such notions. “I think that when you discuss a greater Thai cuisine the discussion becomes deeply entangled in identity politics and race,” he says. “Is Isan food Thai or Lao? Is northern food, which was greatly influenced by the Burmese who occupied Lanna, Thai? Is southern Thai cooking, especially that of the southernmost provinces which used to be Sultanates of Malaysia, Thai?” These are tricky territories for foreigners to negotiate; the question “What is Thai food?” quickly turns into “What is Thailand?”

Apart from adding unwelcome tensions to the dining experience – and potentially leading hosts to wonder whether serving red or yellow curry might be interpreted as a political statement – such arguments also mean that more significant questions are overlooked. Is jungle curry at Nahm too fierce? Is jellied tom klong soup at Sra Bua too sweet? What do you think of Bo.Lan's seafood salad, or miang kham at Soul Food Mahanakorn?

Wrisley is perfectly happy for his food to be judged, criticised, even condemned, but he queries the criteria used to make the judgement. What should critics be asking? “How about: ‘Is it delicious?’ That's the appropriate question.” ■



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