

Thailand's Tourist Cooking Schools: Disrupting Distance, Affirming Difference

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ABSTRACT: The growing popularity of culinary tourism inspires many travelers to view local cuisines as a way to connect to the people and places that they visit. Such cross-cultural encounters appeal in part because they offer to disrupt conventional commodity chains and their associated hierarchies, bringing together consumers and producers who would otherwise be separated by significant geographic distances and not infrequently by racial/ethnic, cultural, and/or classed inequalities. At the same time, however, transnational tourists' relative ease of mobility is a form of global privilege that contrasts sharply with the more limited mobility and economic disadvantage characterizing many of the societies to which leisure travelers are drawn. Similarly, culinary tourism reflects the popularity of 'eating otherness' as a form of cosmopolitan cultural capital, one which both obscures and reproduces the hierarchies of difference that enable some, typically more dominant, groups to consume the products of (often) subordinate and culturally distinctive others. Drawing on ethnographic research in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand, I explore how tourist-oriented cooking schools navigate this tricky terrain, engaging global tourists' cosmopolitan privilege alongside their desire for a meaningful cultural and culinary encounter.

Thailand's tourist cooking schools generate experiences that most clients recognize as both authentic and entertaining. They do so in part by highlighting images and activities that cultivate a sense of connection for clients to 'real' Thai cuisine and related contexts (e.g., open air markets, artisanal crafts and tools, rural locations, organic gardens). I argue, however, that to a considerable degree this success relies less

on connecting across cultural distance than on affirming clients' cosmopolitan desires for consuming difference. Observations made at twelve cooking schools offer numerous examples of the strategies schools use to highlight their cultural authenticity while still preserving the privileged status and cosmopolitan identities of school clients. In persistent, if often subtle, ways tourist cooking schools enlist travelers' own sense of global distinction as a vital component of what makes the cooking lesson an authentic cultural and culinary encounter. Using two cooking schools as case studies, I look more closely at the promotional strategies and value-adding discourses that undergird this form of Thai culinary tourism. Each case makes clear the importance of clients' cosmopolitan identities for understanding the appeal of cooking schools' presentation of authenticity, dynamics that are present but often more implicit in the strategies of the other schools I observed.

In conclusion, I argue that much of what makes tourist cooking lessons so engaging for global travelers is the way these lessons affirm the same patterns of cosmopolitan food adventuring that underpin Thai cuisine's exotic value for casual diners in places like New York City, Paris, or Dublin. In other words, tourists' willingness to spend time and money on a cooking class in Thailand is not just about connecting across (or disrupting) difference to enhance their knowledge of the unique flavors of Thai dishes or of the cuisine's authentic recipes. Rather the persistent attraction of such culinary experiences lies in their ability to satisfy global travelers' cosmopolitan aspirations by validating the privileged appetites encoded within their desires for commodified forms of cultural difference.
