

Too Hot to Handle

Food, Empire, and Race in Thai Los Angeles

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Thai food was one of the great revelations of the [1980s]. It was colorful and exotic, sweet and spicy with a tropical tinge that we all found overwhelmingly seductive.

—Ruth Reichl, “Restaurants in the Eighties,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 1989

The Thai government has in its policies to promote Thailand to be the Kitchen of the World. The procedure has been planned systematically . . . to increase an amount of the Thai restaurants that is the sign of good image to the country including the promotion of the tourist business and the export of the food products and as well other goods.

—Thai Kitchen to the World, Web site, 2010

We need to start organizing around real issues, not just cultural events and food festivals.

—Chanchanit Hirunpidok, executive director of Thai Community Development Center, in Jake Doherty, “Westlake Thai Group Strives for Greater Cohesion,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 19, 1994

As fire and smoke enveloped Los Angeles’s night sky to chants of “Burn, Baby, Burn!” during the 1965 Watts Riots, a burning sensation of a different sort struck residents fifteen miles away in the city’s west side—on their tongues. That same

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year, homemaker Marie Wilson published *Siamese Cookery*, the first Thai cookbook in the United States. Wilson had been “enchanting” her friends with hot and spicy Thai food since moving to West Los Angeles in 1960. She wrote the cookbook partly as a memoir, specifically for white housewives to encourage them to make Thai food a “happy addition to your household.”¹ Wilson included dozens of recipes collected over ten years of travel through Thailand, recipes that tried to replicate “Thai taste” as she remembered it with the ingredients that were available.

Taste and smell marked difference. “New herbs and spices will fill your house with appetizing odors and make meal time an exciting adventure,” Wilson promised her readers.² Taste and smell to a large extent defined Wilson’s memory of Thailand or what she often, perhaps nostalgically, referred to as “Siam.” When she first traveled to Thailand in 1952 to marry her fiancé, Wilson recalled that “everything was so strange, I thought I would never get used to the very spicy foods, the humid, hot weather or the family customs.”³

The newlyweds, along with their newborn daughter Elizabeth, spent the next year and a half living in the country she had not known existed. Thai cooks and servants, “indispensible” to helping foreigners adjust in Thailand according to Wilson, introduced the family to Thai cuisine but many times literally left a bad taste in their mouths. The family hired the Thai cooks to shop at the local market, but Wilson recalled being “either ‘squeezed’ on the food money, or forced to care for dozens of the cooks’ ne’er-do-well relatives, or fed poorly cooked food, or just not fed enough. We felt put upon, deprived, and bullied.”⁴ Nevertheless, the “romance of Siam” swept her. Wilson grew to love Thai food for its unique, rich, and highly seasoned dishes that “happily” combined its Indian and Chinese origins. She discovered the greatest pleasure, however, in the cuisine’s hot and spicy flavors: “Thais don’t care whether their food is hot . . . we soon learned that hot food was only a Western idea but we never gave up trying to convince our cooks [hot] was better.”⁵

Wilson’s story raises compelling questions for interrogating the history of foodways. As a white woman from Los Angeles, how did she gain access to Thai food practices? Is Wilson a Thai food pioneer in the United States or a perpetrator of cultural theft? Why did taste and smell matter? How did Thais negotiate foreigners’ fascination with Thai cuisine? Did food emerge as a liberatory force for Thais to challenge power?⁶

A growing number of scholars have taken up the issue of food as a site of political contestation dense with social and cultural meanings. They have placed food within the context of globalization, transnationalism, identity politics, cultural representation, authenticity, consumption, labor, access, hunger, and environmental justice and sustainability. Some of the works that best illustrate these connections examine the role of food in the history of ethnic community and identity formation. An overwhelming amount of attention has been given to examining the relationship between food and “culture” in which scholars see food practices, its procurement,

representation, and consumption as a *reflection* of ethnic or cultural traditions.⁷ Less attention however, has been given to the complex relationship between food and race in the United States, in which food is used to analyze social hierarchies of power as they are inscribed on the body through categories that are created, reconfigured, organized, and deployed in relation to historical processes.

There is an important difference between “food and culture” and “food and race,” with equally important consequences. Studies on food and culture in the United States tend to not only focus on white consumption but also analyze identity within older models of race, specifically the ethnicity paradigm.⁸ Ethnic food (as with ethnicity), they seem to suggest, is a cultural tradition that every ethnic group—Chinese, Jewish, Indian, Italian, Japanese, Mexican, Greek, Irish—possesses and we must assume operates in U.S. society the same way for all groups. The question they are most concerned with is whether ethnic food practices can tell us if ethnic groups are assimilating, acculturating, or maintaining their identities in the United States. Most often, this is measured against the experiences of white ethnic groups of the past. Haiming Liu and LianLian Lin support this narrative in their study of Chinese culinary identity and transnationalism by stating, “American food history is a story of new immigrants bringing in new tastes and new diets, adding and enriching American culinary culture rather than a melting-pot tale of different ethnic groups assimilating into one dominant culture.”⁹ The political thrust of studies on “food and culture” is to promote a cultural pluralist or liberal multiculturalist view of U.S. society in which ethnic groups should be allowed to maintain their unique cultural traditions, values, and identities since U.S. culture itself is a mixture of different cultures.

I disagree with interpretations of ethnic food along these lines. Instead, I build on the research of Pysche Williams-Forson, Melanie DuPuis, Valerie Matsu-moto, Anita Mannur, Frederick Douglass Opie, and Vicki Ruiz, who have placed race front and center in their analysis of foodways.¹⁰ These scholars have shown how and why food is embedded in the creation and maintenance of racial thinking and practice in the United States. They show that *ethnic food* itself is a racialized term used to invoke the “exotic” nonwhite other, and that some ethnic foods are indeed more “ethnic” than others.¹¹ Some, such as Rachel Slocum, have even used food to push scholars of race to move beyond performance and social construction frameworks to pay attention to the materiality of race as a bodily practice.¹² It is imperative to continue to investigate the intersection of food and race, because race has been and continues to be the operative category for ethnic groups in U.S. society, whether we wish it to be or not. As Nicolas DeGenova contends, we must “repudiate the preposterous absurdity of essentialist claims concerning a putative cultural basis for Latino or Asian identities and likewise dispense with ethnicity as an analytical category that merely muddles notions of *culture* and *race*.”¹³ Prioritizing race may compel food studies scholars to challenge narrow and rigid notions of culture, con-

front the dangerous notion that culture explains all human behavior, and rid ourselves of the silly debate over authenticity by asking instead who gets to define what is authentic and when, where, why.¹⁴ Above all else, we can remodel the political project that sees ethnic food as a step toward tolerance and respect and thus, pitches racism as an individual problem of bigotry and “ignorance”—into a project that uses ethnic food to expose and eradicate white supremacy at a global scale.

Despite the significant contributions scholars of race have made to food studies, one area that has yet to be thoroughly examined is the history of food, race, and sensation, most notably taste and smell.¹⁵ I heed the calls of Mark Smith and Connie Chiang to attend to the history of the senses and how they worked in concert to “make” race.¹⁶ I am fascinated by how and why taste and to a lesser extent smell, along with sight, became entangled with racial ideologies during a moment of intense social disruption in post-1965 U.S. society. After the passage of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act, immigration and refugee migration from Asia, Southeast Asia, and Latin America caused a great deal of anxiety among white U.S. citizens that the United States was going to become a “Third World” country. Discussions over immigration operated as a racial discourse, collapsing the national and ethnic identities of these new immigrants into racial categories. However, the rise of the ethnicity paradigm, especially among whites, also shaped this racial moment. The growing fascination with finding one’s “roots” and cultural traditions, tourism abroad, and a desire to learn about world cultures that was a primer for liberal multiculturalism required ethnic differences to be rendered “visible.” Yet, if we accept the claim made by ethnic studies scholars that the general white U.S. population had difficulty telling members of different Asian, Latino, Black, and Native-American groups apart, sight then was not the most reliable sense to help decipher cultural difference, given that these groups did not always walk around in their respective regalia. Sound was a bit more helpful but could also mislead and blur ethnic differences. As Los Angeles turned into a city of “babel,” the untrained ear probably could not hear the distinctions and nuances between the varieties of languages spoken.

This article explores the way Thais in Los Angeles used Thai cuisine to negotiate race and ethnicity in the United States. I argue that while white U.S. citizens used the taste of Thai food to racialize Thais as the “exotic,” nonwhite other and reestablish the boundaries of race—Thais also relied on taste to discern and maintain critical ethnic differences between themselves and other Asian groups in an attempt to undermine their racialization. Identifying Thai flavors and aromas reinforced ideas about racial difference in a post-civil-rights society by safely talking about “culture” instead of physical features and biological makeup. I also assert that because of Thai food’s popularity, Thais confronted an emerging racial ideology of liberal multiculturalism in U.S. society through what Lisa Heldke calls “cultural food colonialism.”¹⁷ This “attitude problem” is characterized by whites’ passion for cooking, eating, and *appreciating* food that was rooted in a colonialist thirst for

adventure, authenticity, and novelty. They found and appropriated “exotic culture” in the cuisine of economically dominated or Third World people, which worked to justify and was justified by U.S. political and economic forms of colonialism and imperialism. My plan is to first discuss Thai migration to Los Angeles and the early Thai food scene. Then I will show how U.S. empire shaped cultural food colonialism when U.S. citizens came into contact with Thai food in Thailand. Lastly, I analyze how Thais grappled with cultural food colonialism by looking at the role of taste in the making of Thai American identity and community formation in Los Angeles.

Scholars have used a variety of disciplinary approaches and methods to analyze food. Though my work is interdisciplinary, my method of choice here is historical analysis based on archival research. I draw on a wide range of sources, including oral histories, newspapers, cookbooks, menus, magazines, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer papers, and other original sources yet to be archived. Oral histories are extremely important to uncovering Thai American history, given that Thai immigrants left very few written records of their experiences. Moreover, when dealing with ephemera related to food and its tastes and smells, so much is off the written record. There are of course limitations, but my primary concern has been to provide a taste, or whiff, of Thai food and how and why its production, representation, and consumption changed over time.

Thai Migration and the Early Thai Culinary Scene in Los Angeles

The passage of the Hart-Cellar Act, or the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, and U.S. foreign policy in Thailand accelerated Thai migration to the United States, which started as a mostly male and “middle-class” migration but shifted to predominantly female and working class. The first wave of Thais, who arrived between 1945 and 1965, consisted of a small number of largely male government officials, political elites, and middle-class Thais from urban Bangkok. But the Immigration Act of 1965 dramatically changed the demographics of the Thai population. Within a decade, the number of Thais in the United States increased twenty-fold from a few thousand to about 170,000 by 1975, a rate of increase larger than any other immigrant group.¹⁸ But most importantly, this second wave altered gender and class dynamics as it included a significantly higher number of women, younger migrants, tourists, students, and a lower number of professionals.¹⁹ U.S. militarization in Thailand played a part in these demographics. For instance, almost half of Thai immigrant women were wives of U.S. citizens, most likely GI “war brides.”²⁰ The route of choice for Thai migrants was to obtain a “nonimmigrant” student or tourist visa and then either change their status or simply overstay the visa and remain as “robin-hoods” or undocumented Thais.²¹ In the mid-1970s, 79 percent of Thais in the United States were reported to be “nonimmigrants,” with most entering the country under student or tourist visas.²² According to the U.S. consulate in Bangkok,

in 1971 only 25 percent of Thai students in the United States returned to Thailand. By the 1970s and 1980s, the number of “unskilled” and female Thai migrants continued to grow, though they differed from the second wave in that they arrived from the more rural areas of northern and central Thailand as opposed to urban centers.

Los Angeles became home to the largest Thai population in the United States and outside Thailand during this period. The number of Thais in Los Angeles, including undocumented migrants, grew from a few hundred in 1965 to an estimated 10,000 by the mid-1970s; by 1990 the number reached approximately 100,000.²³ By the mid-1970s, a majority of the Thai population moved to the multiracial, multiethnic, and largely immigrant neighborhood of East Hollywood.²⁴ East Hollywood gradually grew into a Thai “ethnic” as Thai travel agencies, newspaper presses, auto shops, beauty parlors, and other businesses were established to attract and serve Thai immigrants. At least one-third of these businesses were food related.²⁵

Thai male college students, a majority of whom were Chinese Thai, seem to have been the first to open and operate Thai restaurants that began as short-term ventures to satisfy the craving for Thai flavors among the Thai student population.²⁶ Some Thais believe that the first restaurant opened in Lynwood, California, in 1969 only to close quickly thereafter.²⁷ Another record from the American Thai Education and Research Institute, however, claims that the first Thai-owned restaurant was established in 1961 and catered only to Thai customers.²⁸ The reason no definitive record exists is because early restaurants were temporary, mostly small make-shift shops intended to serve a Thai student clientele that planned to return to Thailand once they completed their studies. This was a response to a growing number of Thai students who, after sampling “American” food and finding it to be too bland and boring, hungered for a burst of Thai flavors.²⁹ What most likely occurred is that the more culinarily savvy Thai students, who regularly cooked Thai dishes at home and enjoyed them communally with a small group of culinary-challenged friends, seized this opportunity.³⁰ But word quickly spread beyond the Thai population as Thai student restaurateurs discovered their food attracted a new group of customers: whites. This was the case for one of the first restaurateurs, Surapol Mekpongsatorn, who opened a noodle shop sometime during the early 1960s with equipment and ingredients purchased from Chinatown. His noodle soups were so successful with both Thais and whites that he once boasted to friends that he made “so much cash he had to sleep on it under his bed.”³¹

Like Mekpongsatorn, anyone who produced Thai food during this time used Chinese ingredients to simulate Thai flavors, as Southeast Asian ingredients had yet to be imported to the United States. Cooks tried, with relative success, to produce the complex yet balanced Thai flavor profile of hot/spicy, salty, sour, and sweet (though not all Thai dishes are hot/spicy). This required creativity and a skilled palate.³² Thai restaurateurs frequently visited Chinese markets in Chinatown to buy

produce, sauces, rice, and other foodstuffs along with utensils and dishware. While they could easily find soy sauce, staple items such as fish sauce and curry paste, which served as the base for all Thai curries, were not available.³³ Marie Wilson's *Siamese Cookery* reflects the scarcity of Thai ingredients. Consider her recipe for "Khrueng Kaeng," or Shrimp Curry (Kaeng Khrueng in Thai):

1 tbsp. ground coriander
 1 tbsp. ground caraway seed
 1 tsp. turmeric
 1 tsp. pepper
 ¼ tsp. cayenne pepper
 ½ tsp. freshly grated nutmeg
 2 tbsp anchovy paste
 2 tsp vinegar

Combine coriander, caraway, turmeric, pepper, cayenne, nutmeg and blend. Add anchovy paste and vinegar and mix well. Store in a small airtight jar in refrigerator.³⁴

Here, Wilson's recipe suggests using anchovy paste to capture the saltiness of fish sauce and cayenne pepper for the spiciness of Thai chili peppers.³⁵ When she told her Thai friends in the United States about using sour cream in place of coconut cream for Thai curry dishes, they "approved enthusiastically as soon as they tasted a curry made with it."³⁶ Wilson's Thai friends however, had already been experimenting with cow's milk, sweet cream, or buttermilk to replace coconut cream.

Chasing "authentic" Thai flavors ultimately led to the discovery of a Kaffir-lime tree roughly sixty miles away from Hollywood in Riverside, California. The *makrut* is native to Southeast Asia and is a key component of Thai cooking. Unlike other types of citrus, the fruit itself is not highly sought after, owing to its very bitter juice. Instead, Thai cooks prize the aromatic leaves and use them for their pungent flavor. Based on an interview I conducted, Thais learned that someone smuggled *makrut* into the United States during the 1940s or 1950s and planted a tree on the University of California–Riverside campus, most likely in its citrus variety collection.³⁷ The collection was perhaps the only place in the country to raise *makrut*, since it was illegal to import Asian-grown citrus for fear of canker disease. To get Kaffir-lime leaves, Thais drove in small groups to Riverside and picked an abundance of *bai makrut* and also gathered lemon grass shoots. As soon as they returned home, they froze the leaves in plastic bags to preserve them for later use in making *nahm prik pao*, or chili paste—an indispensable ingredient for Thai dishes such as Tom Yum soup.³⁸ Thais in Los Angeles thus placed a high level of importance on taste through the procurement of Thai ingredients in these produce pilgrimages.

No one responded to the need for Thai ingredients more than Pramorte Tilakamonkul, who opened the Bangkok Market and an import company on Mel-

rose Avenue in Hollywood, California, in 1971. The Thai market was the first of its kind. Tilakamonkul had little formal education and settled in Los Angeles by way of Houston sometime during the 1960s in search of work. At twenty-six years old, Tilakamonkul knew Thai food more than anything else. His son, Jet, worked in the market and recalls that his father “had the vision to say ‘hey, there’s a ton of Southeast Asian people here and we need to eat things like green papaya and long beans and jackfruit, [be]cause we don’t have any.’”³⁹

Acquiring Thai and Southeast Asian produce remained a difficult endeavor. So during the 1960s, Tilakamonkul and a small cohort of Thai entrepreneurs first addressed the issue by traveling back to Thailand to collect plants, fruits, and vegetables native to Southeast Asia and sneak them into the United States. They brought a variety of produce, including lemon grass, galanga, and Thai basil. To create a local supply, they next attempted to grow them in different parts of Southern California. An attempt in rural Chino in San Bernardino County failed, as did an effort in San Diego.⁴⁰ Weather posed a major barrier, because, having been removed from their native climate, plants required proper seasonal weather to grow successfully.

The group solved the problem by partnering with a fruit and vegetable wholesale company in Fresno, California, S.S.K. Produce, Inc. Tilakamonkul discovered that California’s Central Valley was ideal for transplanting the Thai produce, with the perfect amount of heat and chill during the summertime. But the Bangkok Market needed produce locally and year-round. This led the cohort to Mexico, where they forged a transnational trade network across the southern U.S. border. They formed two trading zones, which grew 90 percent of the Southeast Asian produce that came into the United States during the summer and winter seasons. Jet describes the conditions: “These are thousands of Mexicans that are growing our food. [They] don’t know how to eat it, [they] don’t know what the hell to do with it, and they’re exporting it to us. It’s really amazing to see.” In addition to the retail market, Tilakamonkul opened two family-operated import warehouses, one in the northern California city of San Jose and the other in Maywood in Southern California’s City of Industry.⁴¹

Rick Bonus and Huping Ling have identified ethnic markets and restaurants as important “locations” in which racial and ethnic identity is shaped and “cultural communities” are formed for groups that are not geographically bounded.⁴² Inside the Bangkok Market, for example, one could find Thai butchers behind the meat counter preparing cuts of beef, pork, chicken, and assorted organ meats.⁴³ Customers also served themselves to a wide array of seafood imported from Asia and a variety of fresh fish not available elsewhere. The produce section was stocked with Thai basil, the infamous Kaffir limes, golf ball-sized, greenish-white Thai eggplant, lemon grass, jackfruit, green papaya, baby bok choy, orange kabucha squash, Chinese celery, and radish, to name a few. And in the aisles were sixteen

types of canned curry paste, different varieties of smoked, pickled, or dried fish in bags, cans, or freezer packs, and high-quality long-grain white and flavored rice in 25-, 50-, or 100-pound bags.⁴⁴ By the early 1980s, several markets and import companies specializing in Thai and Southeast Asian foodstuffs opened in Chinatown, Westlake, and Hollywood.

The efforts to open the Bangkok Market clearly illustrate how the intensification of globalization brought Thai goods, ingredients, and foodstuffs to Los Angeles and made it available to Thais in more convenient fashion. But the “globalization” of food must be placed within the context of U.S. empire and the ways in which U.S. foreign policy and power facilitated the arrival of food from around the world to the United States. Thus, the history of Thai food in Los Angeles is incomplete unless we take into account the relationship between the United States and Thailand.

Post–World War II U.S. Empire in Thailand and “Cultural Food Colonialism”

After World War II, relations between the United States and Thailand intensified into a deeper “friendship” that was nothing short of neocolonial. As the new global leader, the United States showed immediate support by helping Thailand gain membership in the United Nations in December 1946. Still, U.S. officials cared very little about Thailand beyond a regional plan to restore Japan’s war-ravaged economy.⁴⁵ The Cold War changed all of that. During the 1950s and 1960s, the period Benedict Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones call Thailand’s “American Era,” the U.S. government invested approximately \$2.2 billion of economic and military aid to consolidate Thailand’s antidemocratic police state.⁴⁶ The rise of leftist anticolonial movements in Laos and Vietnam as well as China’s Communist revolution made Thailand a prime potential base to combat alternative political economies deemed threatening to U.S. free-market capitalist interests. U.S. officials described Thailand as the “heart” and “citadel” of the region and as a pro-Western country deserving of U.S. support.⁴⁷ Along with the proliferation of military bases across Thailand, the United States opened an embassy and placed the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) headquarters in Bangkok in 1955. Thai leaders compromised Thailand’s hopes of liberation, democracy, and self-determination by linking their fate to the United States and the First World and by getting swept up in Communist baiting rather than throwing their lot in with the Third World.⁴⁸ Indeed, both countries entered into the relationship with shared goals of “security.” Although officials from both countries continually pointed out Thailand’s history as a free and independent nation that cleverly avoided formal colonization by Western powers for hundreds of years, the result was a patron-client relationship—a severely unequal friendship.

U.S. intervention played a key role in transforming Thai food culture by stimulating Thailand’s postwar nation-building efforts with the construction of hotels and restaurants aimed at U.S. officials and tourists. Thailand invested heavily in building a tourist-centered infrastructure, with the dramatic increase of its *farang*

(white) population. By the late 1960s, this population had become distinctly American, whereas before it had been European.⁴⁹ Prior to the late 1950s, Thailand had no organized tourist industry and had only 871 tourist-standard hotel rooms and roughly forty thousand visitors per year.⁵⁰ In 1959, the Thai tourism authority began planning development through the rapid construction of new airport runways, highways, GI Rest and Recreation tours, and hotels with over seven thousand rooms. By 1970 U.S. citizens constituted the largest group of the six hundred thousand visitors.⁵¹ The growing number of hotels allowed Thai chefs to interact more intimately with U.S. officials and distinguished travelers. Thai sous chefs learned fruit, vegetable, ice, and butter carving specifically to entertain tourists.⁵² In Bangkok in the 1960s, Thai restaurants catering to private dining experiences with a Western sequence of courses began to appear along with a range of foreign restaurants—Korean, Lebanese, Japanese, Italian, French, Mexican—in part to attract U.S. diplomats, businessmen, and military officials.⁵³ Classical Thai dinner-and-dance shows also lured more wealthy tourists and visitors, who could experience “authentic” Thai food in a palacelike setting of “Old Siam.”⁵⁴

It appeared as if the United States—with its political, economic, and cultural influence on Thailand as well as the travel adventures and appetite for the exotic—simply took over where the old European colonial powers left off. But Thailand served as a “workshop” to modify and thus strengthen the U.S. empire, helping to disguise it as a democratic, anticolonial leader in a new postwar racial moment.⁵⁵ The defeat of Nazi Germany and the rise of anticolonial movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America pushed the United States to assure itself and the rest of the world that its leadership of the Free World did not simply mean business as usual: the continuation of white supremacy by way of colonial rule. In response to these transformations, U.S. officials crafted what Christina Klein calls a “global imaginary of integration,” a model of sentimental education that encouraged ordinary U.S. citizens to participate in the Cold War by creating intellectual and emotional bonds to win the hearts and minds of the “darker nations.”⁵⁶ As the liberal counterpart to the discourse of Communist containment, the global imaginary of integration depicted the world as a place with open pathways between nations where differences could be resolved and overcome. With modernization theory serving as ideology, the United States tried to secure the supremacy of global capitalism and uplift Thais along U.S. lines by promoting “development,” democracy, and cultural understanding.⁵⁷ Numerous U.S. organizations designed to promote education and cultural exchange were placed in Thailand, including the Fulbright Foundation, the privately funded American University Alumni, the Agency for International Development, and the U.S. Peace Corps.⁵⁸ Establishing U.S. hegemony required more than a defensive posture of Communist containment. It required the *integration* of Asia and the Pacific.

Cultural food colonialism constituted the edible version of the global imagi-

nary of integration. White businessmen, for example, considered the consumption of new and exotic cuisine as a political act that opened the door for cultural understanding. On June 2, 1959, the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) and the Pacific Area Travel Association (PATA) hosted a banquet at the Balboa Bay Club in Newport Beach, California, to highlight the cultural wonders of Pacific Rim countries ripe for U.S. tourism. An overwhelmingly white audience of roughly six hundred guests, members of the \$2-billion-dollar international travel industry, feasted on cuisine and watched live cultural performances that played up the wonders and magnificence of Asian and Pacific cultures. Guests indulged in epicurean delights of Australian rock-shell oysters on the half shell, Indian spiced Mulligatawny soup, New Zealand lamb chops, Japanese sake, coconut sauce from the Philippines, and Kona coffee and fresh pineapple spears from the newly admitted state of Hawaii.⁵⁹ Each of these countries was a Cold War ally of the United States. While dining, they shared personal testimonies about the food, performances, and countries they represented. As Japanese women in kimonos served sake, one guest commented, “Sake was discovered during the reign of Shun more than four thousand years ago.” R. W. “Bert” Hemphill, former president of both ASTA and PATA, announced in response, “You know that Asia was the scene of the oldest civilization known to us—that it formed the background and basis of Greek and Roman culture?” This, coming from the man who traveled across the African continent in 1949 only to declare that “the final conquest of Africa has been made possible by the modern plane.”⁶⁰

The everyday experiences of U.S. Peace Corps volunteers provide a glimpse of how white U.S. citizens, especially women, approached Thai food with curiosity and excitement. Volunteers commonly made fond references to their first tastes and smells of Thai food when recalling their Peace Corps assignments during the mid- to late 1960s.⁶¹ Marianne May Apple, a volunteer from San Diego, California, assigned to Trat Province in southeastern Thailand, typed a letter to her parents on May 24, 1966, explaining that “the food really takes getting used to. It all has a distinctive taste and most of it is so hot that you think you’re on fire.”⁶² In another letter to her sister later that year, Apple wrote: “My teacher . . . usually invites me to lunch on Sat[urday] after I finish teaching. Last time we had crab eggs and blood—good[,] believe it or not! . . . I think I will write a Thai cookbook . . . because I have so many recipes that are of more a variety than those in the book at home.”⁶³ Apple also photographed Thai ingredients and dishes at the request of her parents, and suggested that the family plant a small Thai pepperbush, and find lemon grass and Kaffir lime to make “authentic” Thai food.

U.S. intervention also provided an opportunity for white U.S. citizens, several from Los Angeles, to bring their Thai culinary “discoveries” home, specifically to Los Angeles. Marie Wilson went to Thailand with her husband, who was on a Fulbright scholarship teaching English. But she was not the only food adventurer to appropriate Thai food practices. Santa Monica resident Meda Croizat, a well-

traveled gourmet chef and home economics teacher, first tried Thai food in Bangkok in the 1950s where her husband, a U.S. Marine colonel, was stationed. Croizat, too, enjoyed Thai cuisine, because it was unique compared to other kinds of “Oriental cookery” she experienced traveling in Asia.⁶⁴ Others, like Jennifer Brennan, taught cooking classes to introduce Thai cuisine. Also a resident of Santa Monica, Brennan had over twenty years of travel experience in East Asia, Southeast Asia, India, and Pakistan as well as teaching experience with Chinese and Indian cooking.⁶⁵ In the 1970s, the “indescribable mixture of flavors” of Thai food compelled her to teach evening Thai cooking classes for white housewives in the recreation room of her apartment building. Her \$30 courses, based on participation instead of demonstration, were often overcrowded.⁶⁶ Like Wilson, Brennan would later use her collection of Thai recipes and experiences to author and publish a cookbook of her own in 1981, *The Original Thai Cookbook*.

U.S. Cold War geopolitics in Thailand paved the way for U.S. citizens to have direct contact with Thai food, to construct imaginings of Thailand and Thai people, and to further fuel the appetite for the exotic Other’s cuisine. The ways in which food turned into a site of racial formation for Thais outside Thailand, particularly through taste and smell, and how Thais negotiated these processes in Los Angeles during the 1970s and 1980s is a story to which we now turn.

Taste and the Making of Thai American Identity and Community

In Los Angeles, the marketing of the first Thai restaurants as “Thai-Chinese” establishments during the 1960s and early 1970s captures the way ethnic and national categories from Southeast Asia collapsed into racial categories when they interacted with the dominant U.S. racial glossary. Regardless of the fact that a majority of the first Thai restaurateurs were Chinese Thai or that they probably used ingredients from Chinese markets, it is likely that the intent behind names such as “The Orient,” “Lee’s Thai and Chinese Food,” and “Fortune Cookie” was to use the familiar to draw customers.⁶⁷ Once inside the restaurant, customers were greeted by Thai cooks trying to convince them to sample Thai dishes. Aside from its economic motivations, playing with the concept of “Oriental” and other Chinese signifiers points to the salience of race and racial thinking in U.S. society. Faced with the difficult task of introducing a new cuisine to U.S. consumers, Thai restaurateurs racialized Thai food as Oriental cuisine with the understanding that most U.S. citizens could not tell them apart from members of other Asian groups.

But what eyes could not adequately decipher, the tongue did. Advertising the lesser known “Thai” with the more widely recognized “Chinese” gave the impression that Thai food and Chinese food were similar—they were not. Many in the United States were familiar with Chinese, specifically Cantonese, flavors of salty, sweet, sour, pungent, and sometimes bitter.⁶⁸ Thai dishes, as mentioned earlier, possessed a more expansive flavor profile of salty, sweet, hot/spicy, sour, and at times

bitter. Thai restaurateurs soon found that white U.S. citizens—who had become adventurous eaters in search of interesting and new exotic foods—were enthralled by Thai flavors. Thai food was described as tastier and “more coherent than any other in Southeast Asia” because it awakened new parts of the palate.⁶⁹

Thai flavors represented more than just cuisine, but the essence of Thai history and culture. In *The Original Thai Cookbook*, Jennifer Brennan describes the diversity of people that represent Bangkok: “Small, dark southern Thai, their flattened features showing a kinship to the Malays; paler skinned Northerners; Chinese merchants; bearded and turbaned Sikhs; saffron-robed monks with shaved heads; aristocrats, whose aquiline features betray an ancient Brahmin heritage, and . . . school children in spotless uniforms.”⁷⁰ Writing for a white audience, Brennan explained that the flavors of Thai cuisine reflected how Thais have historically absorbed a variety of cultural influences and seamlessly “translated them into something uniquely Thai.”⁷¹ By endorsing the idea that Thai cuisine was a product of Thai cultural traditions, Brennan ignored the violence of colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, and political conflict in Thailand that at times was stimulated by the very diversity she romanticizes. For example, Thai nationalist movements during the 1940s led to the creation of the iconic wok-fried noodle dish pad thai, to counter the cultural influence of Thailand’s ethnic Chinese population.⁷² In addition, she was unable to see her access and privilege to extract Thai food as raw material and turn it into an “original” Thai cookbook as a colonial practice in and of itself.⁷³

Local food critics and writers played perhaps the biggest role in using ethnic food to talk about racial and ethnic difference. These well-traveled and well-educated culinary adventurers with sophisticated palates helped introduce Los Angelenos to the “delicate” and “complex” flavors of Thai cuisine. But they were also among the first to write about Thais and the Thai community with a sense of authority. In anthropologic language, writers emphasized the uniqueness of Thai flavors and ingredients to distinguish Thais, at the time still a largely invisible and unknown group, from other Asian and Southeast Asian groups. *Los Angeles Times* food columnists Colman Andrews, Rose Dosti, Lois Dwan, Barbara Hansen, and Ruth Reichl covered the city’s Thai food scene extensively. Andrews, for instance, attempted to set the record straight that Thai food was not the same as the more popular Chinese food in an April 1981 column. It is “very much its own thing,” he argued, “an original, complex, remarkably well defined cuisine . . . influenced by the food of south India and Ceylon [Sri Lanka], and possesses many similarities with that of Malaysia (which Thailand borders) and Indonesia.”⁷⁴ Andrews then extrapolated his point by writing, “Today’s Thais are descendants of those Southeast Asian groups, and—most important—a Mongolic Lao-Thai people.”⁷⁵ For Andrews and many food writers, not only was Thai cuisine different from Chinese cuisine, but this culinary difference in flavor meant that Thai people were different from Chi-

nese people. At a moment when various Asian groups immigrated to Los Angeles and made the city's racial and ethnic landscape visibly illegible, ethnic food provided a vocabulary to talk about racial and ethnic differences by referring to what people cooked and ate — rather than their biological makeup.

Thais, too, participated in shaping the discourse by using Thai flavors to proudly express a Thai ethnic and national identity rooted in anticolonial resistance. They depicted Thai cuisine as a product of Thailand's political savvy and cleverness that allowed the nation to remain the only sovereign and independent country in Southeast Asia.⁷⁶ The dominant narrative of Thai cuisine claims that it developed from centuries of Thai trade and exchange with the Chinese (rice noodles), South Asian Indians (curry), and the Portuguese (chilies).⁷⁷ Thai chefs highlighted Thai tastes and flavors as a successful borrowing, mixing, choosing, and discarding of ingredients and food practices. As Thai restaurateur Prakas Yenbamroong explains, "The history of Thai cuisine . . . we developed by adopting and adapting and then defin[ing] to create our own . . . what our ancestors did was a neat thing."⁷⁸ "Southeast Asian[s]," he added, "we share many of the ingredients, but the Thai came out ahead . . . so balanced, so . . . harmonious."⁷⁹

The articulation of a Thai nationalist identity through food also happened spatially at the Wat Thai of Los Angeles in North Hollywood, California, which was the largest Thai Buddhist temple in the United States.⁸⁰ Completed in 1979, the Wat Thai served as a transnational community center for approximately forty thousand Thai Theravada Buddhists out of the seventy thousand Thais in Southern California.⁸¹ Throughout the 1980s, the temple held numerous cultural festivals highlighted by food, attracting thousands of Thais as well as Cambodians, Vietnamese, and Laotians. On one April weekend in 1982, the Wat Thai held a three-day festival to celebrate the Thai New Year and most importantly, the two-hundred-year anniversary of King Rama I's decision to move the capital of Thailand from Ayutthaya to Bangkok.⁸² Hundreds of Thais attended to honor the continued resilience of an independent Thai nation against foreign invasion. Food vendors, almost all Thai women, set up rows of booths at nine each morning. Selling and serving food on or near a religious site was common in Thailand, and for Thai vendors and those in attendance the scene reflected the intersection of social and religious life in urban Bangkok.⁸³ With limited space in the parking lot, vendors placed portable stovetops, griddles, deep fryers, steamers, and makeshift barbeques behind counters of tented booths. Festivalgoers enjoyed the food on benches and on the lawn of the courtyard.⁸⁴

Thais considered Wat Thai's food as the most authentic in taste and preparation in Los Angeles. Thai-only signs and menus suggested that the food was catered specifically to Thais.⁸⁵ Cooks showcased bold flavors and spiciness in dishes that could not be found on most restaurant menus. Sold in snack portions on foam plates and bowls, foil, or stuffed in paper bags, dishes included grilled Thai sausage, chicken

satay, mee grob (sweet crispy noodles), *sohm tham* (papaya salad), fish cakes, noodle soups, fried bananas, coconut desserts, and the popular mango with sticky rice.⁸⁶ Not surprisingly, the food was so good it caught the attention of non-Thais, especially white U.S. citizens. The temple's food festivals emerged as a space for "race as a bodily practice."⁸⁷ Race was embodied and material in new ways, rather than performed, as Thais and Southeast Asians prepared, sold, purchased, and ate food while whites observed, smelled new smells, and tasted. Aromas floating in the air, as described by a magazine columnist, added to the sights and sounds: "A hawker's cart exudes the pungent odor of *keuay teiw nam*—noodle soups to which diners add red peppers and sweet sauce. Atop a brazier, skewers of *nue yang* (barbecued beef) grill to a tempting brown."⁸⁸

In the 1970s and 1980s, the number of Thai restaurants in Los Angeles's west side exploded, a critical development that turned restaurants into contact zones between Thais and white U.S. citizens. Restaurant encounters were significant in that they were unequal, racialized encounters based on service and perhaps one of the few physical spaces where Thai bodies interacted with whites and whites with people of color in general. As Jennifer Brennan's Thai cooking courses in Santa Monica illustrate, Thai food culture allowed Thais to enter the city's whitest and wealthiest neighborhoods in ways that they otherwise could not. Racially restrictive covenants played a strong role in keeping West Los Angeles the white part of the city since the turn of the twentieth century and extended long into the post-World War II period.⁸⁹ Thai restaurateurs however, seemed to have benefited from whites' desire for exotic cuisine, as they opened restaurants in Hollywood, West Los Angeles, the San Fernando Valley, and even as far south as Orange County. To name a few, restaurants such as Royal Thai Cuisine, Talésai, Krung Siam, Chao Krung, Chao Praya, Bangkok 1 and 2, Jitlada, Siam, and Tepparod Thai No. 2 and No. 3 all opened in West Hollywood to rave reviews. The Emerald in Culver City, for instance, was described as a "hidden" Thai restaurant for west-side Thai food "lovers" and "freaks."⁹⁰ In 1977, there were at least fifteen Thai restaurants on the west side, with the Tourist Organization of Thailand estimating as many as fifty.⁹¹ Jet Tilakamonkul remembers his father's decision to open the Royal Thai Cuisine in 1979, one of the first Thai restaurants on the west side: "White people got money."⁹²

In addition to cultivating a Thai culinary identity, Thai restaurants gave Thais a sense of empowerment as representatives of cultural exchange and diplomacy between Thais and U.S. citizens by way of the stomach. Chow Burana, who arrived in 1962 as a student at Cal State Los Angeles, had to play the diplomat role when his in-laws asked him to take over Tepparod Thai No. 1. Burana frequently interacted with and adjusted to white U.S. customers who were "sometimes in a very bad mood when they come in" but "after they have eaten they turn into very nice people."⁹³ Trying to represent the Thai way of life did not mean that Thai

restaurateurs obsessed over staging authenticity. Prakas Yenbamroong carefully designed Talésai on Hollywood's Sunset Strip to act as a space of cultural understanding while attempting to create innovative Thai dishes. When Yenbamroong purchased Bangkok No. 2 in 1982 and turned it into Talésai, his goal was to create an "upscale" Thai culinary experience that reflected the dynamic nature of Thai food practices. So he called his mother in Thailand and appointed her as head chef, hired an Italian designer for \$10,000 who advised him to dispose of his idea to name the restaurant "Star of Siam" (along with the \$2,000 sign), and established what he believed to be a gateway to Thai culture: "I look at Thai restaurants and Talésai as cultural ambassadors . . . whether or not we like it we represent Thailand, culturally . . . automatically . . . I try be a good window or ambassador to Thai culture."⁹⁴ Restaurants such as Tepparod Thai No. 1 and Talésai shed light on the way these spaces allowed Thais to negotiate their position in U.S. society.

On the west side, celebrities and others from Hollywood's show business appeared as a new group of food adventurers and, to a certain degree, helped transform Thai food from a rare culinary treasure to a hip and trendy cuisine. Thai restaurants attracted many from the entertainment industry because they were often located nearby film, television, and music studios. Talésai had its share of celebrity diners. Pramorte Tilakamonkul's Royal Thai Cuisine opened next to 20th Century Fox studio, a major complex that filmed and produced *Star Wars*, the *Six Million Dollar Man*, and *The Fall Guy*. On grand opening weekend in 1979, Pramorte Tilakamonkul placed a "Free Food" sign outside his restaurant and confidently told passersby, "You're going to love our food . . . and you're not going to pay anything." Allowing people to indulge in Thai food free of charge for two days straight got "everyone hooked."⁹⁵ Chan Dara, a half-mile west of Sunset Gower studios in West Hollywood, was also usually "packed night and day" with people from the "show biz and media worlds."⁹⁶

Wanchai "Victor" Sodsook and Siamese Princess best capture the rising popularity of Thai food as a novelty among the "rich and famous." Sodsook, who refined his Thai culinary skills while working as a hotel chef during Thailand's "American Era," first opened the Siamese Princess restaurant in Los Angeles in 1976. When he moved the restaurant to West Los Angeles in 1982, it developed into a celebrity magnet. In his cookbook, *I Love Thai Food*, Sodsook boasts that "Hollywood stars love Thai cuisine" and lists his A-list celebrity regulars that include Prince, Sally Struthers, Tina Turner, Jody Foster, Richard Dreyfus, and Warren Beatty.⁹⁷ Madonna enjoyed private vegetarian dinners in one of Siamese Princess's intimate booths.⁹⁸ A lover of hot and spicy flavors, Harrison Ford ate at the restaurant whenever he was in town. The dining room compelled food columnist Rose Dosti to describe Siamese Princess as the "drawing room at some faraway exotic colony at the height of British Empire glory."⁹⁹ Even California's culinary experts recognized the restaurant with a plethora of distinguished awards. By 1989, Siamese Princess and Sodsook held

approximately twenty-two dining awards, becoming more decorated than any other Thai restaurant or chef in the United States.¹⁰⁰

The growing obsession with healthy lifestyles and eating among the white middle class was another trend that bolstered the status of Thai food and provided Thais with another way to distinguish themselves from other groups.¹⁰¹ The 1980s fitness boom that spawned the “aerobics generation” is reflected by the proliferation of health spas across the United States. While there were two thousand health clubs in the United States during the mid-1970s, the number of spas in suburban shopping malls and upscale urban neighborhoods had generated over 6 billion dollars in annual revenues by the end of the 1980s.¹⁰² The health craze was especially strong in Southern California, where even an economic recession made little impact on the profits and memberships of Los Angeles clubs.¹⁰³ Thai restaurateurs caught on. In addition to a better balance of flavors, Thai restaurateurs advertised Thai dishes as a healthier and lighter alternative to other Asian dishes, specifically Chinese.¹⁰⁴ Some Thai restaurants provided healthier options and vegetarian dishes. At Chan Dara, chef Tommy Tang allowed guests to switch white rice for brown rice.¹⁰⁵ At Chan Dara’s second location, owner Sukhum Kittivech observed that “people want less beef and pork, so we offer tofu as a substitute.” Kittivech even created several new dishes, such as spicy tofu, for the health-minded diners he assumed to be the majority of his clientele.¹⁰⁶

By the end of the 1980s, Thai food emerged as the most important component of Thai American community building and identity formation in Los Angeles. It was the center of both conflict and cooperation. One such “food fight” occurred in the winter of 1988, when Victor Sodsook sent a letter to Rose Dosti at the *Los Angeles Times* to protest a column she wrote earlier that year praising Tommy Tang as a pioneer in the field of “Thai-Oriental-Western Cuisine.”¹⁰⁷ Sodsook asked “why not us?” and requested that Dosti write a story on his accomplishments as well. Jet Tilakamonkul also remembers the 1980s as a particularly unsavory period when the approach of many Thai restaurateurs was “if you’re doing really good, I’m gonna open up a restaurant next door to you and cut your market in half . . . the perfect competition model, which screws us all up.”¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, Thai food businesses played a critical economic and social role as primary community institutions that cultivated early Thai American leaders. Pramorte Tilakamonkul participated in a wide range of community-building efforts and was active in founding the Wat Thai of Los Angeles, eventually serving as the temple’s executive vice-president.¹⁰⁹ Aroon Seeboonruang, a scholarship student who moved to California in 1969 from Hawaii after training Peace Corps volunteers, became a successful restaurateur and also assisted with the development of Wat Thai and other Thai organizations.¹¹⁰ Moreover, food businesses and restaurants allowed several Thai entrepreneurs to establish Thai-language newspapers in Los Angeles such as *Siam Media* and *Thai L.A.*¹¹¹

Still, for the majority of Thais the thriving Thai restaurant and food scene exacerbated gender and class divisions already embedded in the racialized poverty of immigrant laborers in post-1965 U.S. society. Thai immigrant women found work most often in the low-wage service industry, in which restaurant service was a main part, and at times with Latino and other Southeast Asian immigrants.¹¹² Thai men worked as restaurant dishwashers and cooks if not as factory workers, auto-shop mechanics, hospital or hotel janitors, and gas-station attendants.¹¹³ For Thai women, although food practices helped them establish social networks and offered a step to economic and social mobility, their subordinated position within the food-production system resulted in various forms of gendered exploitation.¹¹⁴ These women, sometimes mothers, grandmothers, and other family members of Thai male restaurateurs, performed cooking duties in the “back of the house,” often in groups led by *mae krua* or “mother of the kitchen.” Although responsible for producing the dishes, their role was subordinate and their labor cheap and efficient. Tommy Tang once referred to Thai women and Mexican helpers as his “students,” as Rose Dosti observed them “scurry about the tiny kitchen in homey aprons, cooking from a giant colorful palette of spices, herbs and sauces that takes up half the room.”¹¹⁵ In the front of the house, Thai women took and served orders as the gendered embodiment of exotic and authentic Thai. At one restaurant, for instance, waitresses wore mini-skirts with wide hip belts to add a bit of “charm” to the dining experience.¹¹⁶

While Thais managed to construct and exert an ethnic and national identity by negotiating cultural food colonialism, Thai food culture concealed in plain sight the persistence of racial and class hierarchies supported by low-skilled and low-wage service-industry jobs in transnational, global cities such as Los Angeles. During a 1982 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Tommy Tang pointed toward East Hollywood and shared his views about a “whole Thai group” who act like “they’re still in Bangkok.” Tang chastised Thai immigrants for not working to improve their life chances, stating that “they stay together, they don’t speak English, they only work where they don’t need English — garment sweatshops, restaurant kitchens. Those that go out and meet American society will be OK. Those that don’t, won’t.”¹¹⁷ What Tang did not understand was that Thais did, in fact, interact with U.S. society *daily* — but as restaurant workers. In a service economy, immigrant enclaves have historically been located next to neighborhoods that are predominantly white and middle to upper class in which they work, so close physical proximity and interactions become common, regular, and intimate.¹¹⁸ As Mike Davis once put it, the “Oz-like archipelago of Westside pleasure domes — a continuum of tony malls, art centers and gourmet strips — is reciprocally dependent upon the social imprisonment of the third-world service proletariat who live in increasingly repressive ghettos and barrios.”¹¹⁹ East Hollywood, a “dump with pimps, hookers, and drug-dealers,” supplied the low-paid Thai labor force for Thai restaurants that so enchanted the residents of Hollywood, Beverly Hills, and other parts of the west side.¹²⁰

Conclusion

There are at least three lessons to be learned from the history of Thai food in Los Angeles. First, we need to look at the historical significance of food in Thai American community and identity formation to see what barriers activists face in their ongoing efforts for liberation in the United States. This is especially important since the Thai government is set to bring Thai food and restaurants to the world as part of its national economic policy. Second, understanding Thai food as a site of contestation over race, ethnicity, gender, and class highlights the way Thai American identity is fleeting and complex—rather than something that can be reflected. In addition, it pushes us to take seriously the way taste and smell, in addition to sight, has created and maintained racial and ethnic difference, specifically in post-1965 Asian America. We need to understand the multiple ways in which distinctions are created if organizers want to mobilize within and across racial and ethnic lines.

Finally, my version of ethnic food history is a story fraught with negotiations, tension, concessions, and strategies for survival in an increasingly privatized U.S. society within a neoliberal world order. Thais in Los Angeles, as with many groups, participated in food practices because it was an “arena open to them” and used food to nourish an identity rooted in their homeland.¹²¹ But in doing so they did not resist a U.S. society that was hostile. On the contrary, they engaged with a United States that was increasingly open to trying new flavors, and yet one that still used gustatory and olfactory experiences as a way of marking racial difference. It is absolutely critical that we do not celebrate ethnic food and romanticize it as the end of racism and the achievement of our multicultural dreams. And it is absolutely critical that we see multiculturalism as a racial ideology that allows the persistence of racial inequality by suggesting that race no longer matters. So it turns out that food is not the best way to learn about another’s culture. Rather, food is one of the best ways to learn about the changing nature of race making and racism in the United States.

Notes

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1. Marie Wilson, *Siamese Cookery* (Rutland and Tokyo: Tuttle Press, 1965), 16.
2. Ibid.
3. Cecil Fleming, "A Happy Task—Getting to Know Thai Cuisine," *Los Angeles Times*, January 6, 1966.
4. Wilson, *Siamese Cookery*, 12.
5. Fleming, "A Happy Task."
6. Throughout this article, I use *Thai* and *Thai Americans* interchangeably to refer to both Thais from Thailand and Thais in the United States, because it captures the ever-changing nature of identity processes. Given that Thailand itself is home to various ethnic groups, here the term encompasses each of these groups unless otherwise specified. Though Thais during this period did not refer to themselves as *Thai American*, I use the term to suggest that *Thai* was interacting with U.S.-based racial and ethnic categories.
7. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, *Food and Culture: A Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge Press, 2008); Linda Brown Keller, *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984).
8. Hasia Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Haiming Liu and LianLian Lin, "Food, Culinary Identity, and Transnational Culture: Chinese Restaurant Businesses in Southern California," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 12 (June 2009): 135–62; Lucy Long, ed., *Culinary Tourism: Food, Eating, and Otherness* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004); Sylvia Ferrero, "Comida sin par. Consumption of Mexican Food in Los Angeles: Foodscapes in a Transnational Consumer Society," in *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies*, ed. Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton (New York: Routledge Press, 2002).
9. Liu and Lin, "Food, Culinary Identity, and Transnational Culture," 136.
10. Melanie DuPuis, *Nature's Perfect Food: How Milk Became America's Drink* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Psyche Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010); Anita Mannur and Valerie Matsumoto, eds., *Amerasia Journal: Meat versus Rice: New Research on Asian American Foodways* 32 (Los Angeles: University of California—Los Angeles, 2006); Frederick Douglass Opie, *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Vicki Ruiz, "Citizen Restaurant: American Imaginaries, American Communities," *American Quarterly* 60 (March 2008): 1–21. Other excellent works that look at race and the production of food include Matt Garcia, *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900–1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Jose Alamillo, *Making Lemonade Out of Lemons: Mexican Labor and Leisure in a California Town, 1880–1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).
11. Lisa Heldke, *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer* (New York: Routledge Press, 2003), 51.
12. Rachel Slocum, "Thinking Race through Corporeal Feminist Theory: Divisions and Intimacies at the Minneapolis Farmers' Market," *Social & Cultural Geography* 9 (December 2008): 857.
13. Nicholas DeGenova, ed., *Racial Transformations: Latinos and Asians Remaking the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 15.

14. Vijay Prashad, "Multiculturalism Kills Me," in *Z-Net Commentaries*, April 26, 2007, www.zcommunications.org/multiculturalism-kills-me-by-vijay-prashad. See also Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung-Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 69.
15. David A. Davis calls attention to this sensory gap in food studies in his review, "A Recipe for Food Studies," *American Quarterly* 62 (June 2010): 374; Martin Manalansan has also written on "sensory narratives" of Asian ethnic cuisine in his ethnographic study of Queens, New York, in "The Empire of Food: Place, Memory, and Asian Ethnic Cuisines," in *Gastropolis: Food and New York City*, ed. Annie Hauck-Lawson and Jonathan Deutsch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 93–107.
16. Mark M. Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Connie Y. Chiang, "Monterey-by-the-Smell: Odors and Social Conflict on the California Coastline," *Pacific Historical Review* 73 (May 2004): 183–214.
17. Heldke, *Exotic Appetites*, xv–xvi.
18. Jacqueline Desbarats, "Thai Migration to Los Angeles," *Geographical Review* 69 (July 1979): 316.
19. *Ibid.*, 305.
20. *Ibid.*, 306.
21. It is important to understand that while the 1965 Immigration Act eliminated the system of "national origins" it did not "open" immigration. As Mae Ngai argues, the architects of the Act *extended* the numerical ceiling (twenty thousand immigrants per country) as a "normative feature of immigration." See Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 227–28. The Thai community referred to undocumented Thais as "robin-hoods," after the fictional character Robin Hood, who lived in hiding in Thai forests to avoid capture from Thai government and military officials. Based on my research, I believe Thais picked up the name sometime during the 1960s, at first to refer to foreigners who overstayed visas in Thailand. See also Sudarat Disayawattana, "The Craft of Ethnic Newspaper-Making: A Study of the Negotiation of Culture in the Thai-Language Newspapers of Los Angeles" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1993), 55.
22. United States Department of State, Immigration and Naturalization Service Records, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, cited in Narong Kaeonil, "The Thai Community in Los Angeles: An Attitudinal Study of Its Socio-Economic Structure" (PhD diss., United States International University), 34–35.
23. The 1990 U.S. census counted 9,270 Thais in Los Angeles, with 24,191 identifying themselves as Thai in the 1990 census questionnaire. The estimates I provide are from Thai community leaders who have taken into account undocumented Thais and those who did not wish to be counted. James P. Allen and Eugene Turner, *The Ethnic Quilt: Population Diversity in Southern California* (Northridge, CA: The Center for Geographical Studies, 1997); Jake Doherty, "Westlake Thai Group Strives for Greater Cohesion," *Los Angeles Times*, June 19, 1994; Desbarats, "Thai Migration to Los Angeles," 313.
24. Allen and Turner, *Ethnic Quilt*, 160.
25. Desbarats, "Thai Migration to Los Angeles," 315.
26. For the purposes of historical accuracy, I use the term *Chinese Thai* (as opposed to *Sino-Thai*, which only refers to Chinese immigrants who married Thai spouses) to describe

all ethnic Chinese from Thailand. I believe that Chinese Thais strongly identify as *Thai* in addition to their other identities. Thus, they are included in discussions of *Thai* unless otherwise noted. For a more detailed account of the Chinese-Thai identity making in the United States, see Jiemin Bao, *Marital Acts: Gender, Sexuality, and Identity among the Chinese Thai Diaspora* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005).

27. Jet Tilakamonkul, interviewed by author, Hollywood, California, October 16, 2007.
28. Martha Nakagawa, "Thai Community Celebrates with Awards Ceremony," *Asianweek*, September 18, 1992.
29. Lois Dwan, Roundabout, *Los Angeles Times*, February 27, 1972.
30. Jean Barry, *Thai Students in the United States: A Study in Attitude Change*, Cornell Thailand Project, Interim Reports Series, no. 11 (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Dept. of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 1967), 30.
31. Prakas Yenbamroong, interviewed by author, Hollywood, California, January 13, 2010.
32. Penny Van Esterik, *Food Culture in Southeast Asia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 39; Tilakamonkul interview, October 16, 2007.
33. Tilakamonkul interview, October 16, 2007.
34. Wilson, *Siamese Cookery*, 35.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 36.
37. Tilakamonkul interview, October 16, 2007. This appears to be true: www.citrusvariety.ucr.edu/history/index.html (accessed November 14, 2010).
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Rick Bonus, *Locating Filipino Americans: Ethnicity and the Cultural Politics of Space* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), chap. 3. In her work on Chinese in St. Louis and in Huping Ling, ed., *Asian America: Forming New Communities, Expanding Boundaries* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), Ling defines *cultural community* as a community without physical boundaries that creates a sense of identity through cultural activities and organizations.
43. Colman Andrews, "Fare of the Country: With Satay and Tiger Prawns, Fiery Thai Food Is a Hit in L.A.," *New York Times*, July 6, 1990.
44. Ibid.
45. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 144.
46. Benedict R. O. G. Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones, *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1985). U.S. aid estimate is by U.S. Senate for the period 1949–1969 and taken from Patricia Norland et al., *The Eagle and the Elephant: Thai-American Relations Since 1833* (Bangkok: United States Information Service, 1997), 104. These numbers are substantiated by historian David Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 274.
47. R. Sean Randolph, *The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics, 1950–1985* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1986), 26–27.
48. While the argument can be made that Thai leaders had little choice but to align with the powerful First World, Thais were in fact approached with other courses of action. Thailand participated in the 1954 Bandung Conference, in which twenty-nine states and their

- representatives met and voiced their staunch opposition to colonialism and imperialism. As a member of SEATO, Thai leaders defended their decision to side with the United States despite being chastised by other leaders. In short, Thai leaders did have a choice, and they sided with power. See Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2007), 38–39.
49. Baker and Phongpaichit, *History of Thailand*, 149.
 50. Ibid.
 51. Ibid.
 52. Jennifer Brennan, *The Original Thai Cookbook* (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1981), 29.
 53. Philip Cornwel-Smith, *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture* (Bangkok: River Books, 2006), 18; Van Esterik, *Food Culture in Southeast Asia*, 90.
 54. Van Esterik, *Food Culture in Southeast Asia*, 90.
 55. I borrow the term *workshop* from Greg Grandin's *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan, 2007), which examines how the United States essentially used Latin America to fine-tune methods of imperial domination and develop new forms of control that continue to shape current U.S. foreign policy and militarization. In addition to Grandin's work, I build on the body of scholarship on the history of the U.S. empire after World War II, most notably Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middle-Brow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Jana Lipman, *Guantanamo: A Working-Class History between Empire and Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Melanie McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interest in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Adria Imada, "The Military Learns to Lu'au: Imperial Hospitality and Military Photography in Hawai'i," *Contemporary Pacific* 20 (2008): 328–61; Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and Nation Building in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
 56. Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 23.
 57. For a discussion of how modernization theory informed U.S. foreign policy and its similarities to turn-of-the-nineteenth-century U.S. imperialism, see Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, chap. 2.
 58. Norland et al., *Eagle and the Elephant*, 91.
 59. Cordell Hicks, "Travel Agents' Banquet," *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 1959.
 60. R. W. Hemphill, "Travel Notes: Darkest Africa Now Just a Day's Flight," *Los Angeles Times*, February 20, 1949.
 61. Peter Lee, interview conducted by Robert Klein, August 4, 2004, Returned Peace Corp Volunteer Oral History Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library; Jerlyn "Jerri" Minor, interview conducted by Susan Luccini, March 27, 2008, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Oral History Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.
 62. Marianne May Apple, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.
 63. Ibid.
 64. Jean Murphy, "She's Gung Ho for Oriental Cookery," *Los Angeles Times*, August 31, 1967.
 65. Barbara Hansen, "Students Learn by Doing: Thai Cookery with a British Accent," *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 1977.
 66. Ibid.

67. It is my understanding that Chinese Thai in the United States strongly identify with “Thai,” in part because of the impact of Thai nationalism and efforts (sometimes violent) to assimilate ethnic Chinese in Thailand during the nineteenth and mid-twentieth century. So while it is possible that Chinese Thai in Los Angeles opened Thai-Chinese restaurants to highlight their ethnic Chinese identity alongside their Thai identity, my point is that it is most important to think about how they imagined the connection between Chinese and Thai, especially in relation to U.S. racial categories. See Lois Dwan, Roundabout, *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 1970; Bobbie Justice, “Going Native,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 1977.
68. Andrew Coe, *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 85–87.
69. Tilakamonkul interview, October 16, 2007; Yenbamroong interview, January 13, 2010; quote from Dwan, Roundabout, February 27, 1972.
70. Brennan, *Original Thai Cookbook*, 26.
71. *Ibid.*, 6.
72. Van Esterik, *Food Culture in Southeast Asia*, 74.
73. Heldke, *Exotic Appetites*, 52.
74. Colman Andrews, “Restaurants: Thailand’s Food—A Well Defined Cuisine of Its Own,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 12, 1981.
75. *Ibid.*
76. Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (Oxford: Berg Press, 2000), 9.
77. Sirijit Sunanta, “The Globalization of Thai Cuisine” (paper presented at the Canadian Council for Southeast Asian Studies, Toronto, October 14–16, 2005); Tilakamonkul interview, October 16, 2007; Yenbamroong interview, January 13, 2010; Victor Sodsook, *I Love Thai Food* (Los Angeles: Spice Market Studio, 1989), 12.
78. Yenbamroong interview, January 13, 2010.
79. *Ibid.*
80. In her study of a Wat Thai in central California, anthropologist Jiemen Bao describes how Thais in Silicon Valley use the Wat Thai to articulate a transnational “Thai-ness” in “Merit-Making Capitalism: Re-territorializing Thai Buddhism in Silicon Valley, California,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8 (June 2005): 125.
81. Michelle Markel, “Culture Clash,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 1983.
82. Barbara Hansen, “Thais in Southern California Celebrate a Bicentennial,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 1982.
83. Sara Terry, “Thai Food with a California Twist,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 4, 2002.
84. Hansen, “Thais in Southern California.”
85. *Ibid.*
86. *Ibid.*
87. Slocum, “Thinking Race,” 857.
88. Norman Sklarewitz, “Thais That Bind,” *Westways Magazine* (Los Angeles), August 1992.
89. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage Press, 1992), 161–64; George J. Sanchez, “‘What’s Good for Boyle Heights Is Good for the Jews’: Creating Multiracialism on the Eastside during the 1950s,” in *American Quarterly: Los Angeles and the Future of Urban Cultures*, eds. George J. Sanchez and Raul Homero Villa (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 137; Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 14, 27.

90. Lois Dwan, "Ginger Man Comes West," Roundabout, *Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 1978.
91. Colman Andrews, "Thai One On," *Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 1976; quote from chief of Los Angeles office of Tourist Organization of Thailand, Nuanta Dejakaisaya, in Justice, "Going Native."
92. Tilakamonkul interview, October 16, 2007.
93. Dwan, Roundabout, November 30, 1976.
94. Yenbamroong interview, January 13, 2010.
95. Tilakamonkul interview, October 16, 2007.
96. Rose Dosti, Let's Eat Out, *Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 1981.
97. Sodsook, *I Love Thai Food*, 30.
98. Ibid.
99. Rose Dosti, "The Search for LA's Thai Cuisine Pioneers," Let's Eat Out, *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 1988.
100. Ibid.; Between 1982 and 1989, eight "Awards of Excellence" were given to Sodsook and Siamese Princess (one each year). The California Restaurant Writers Association honored him with four consecutive three-star awards for food for the years 1985, 1986, 1987, and 1988. Also between 1985 and 1988, the association awarded him three consecutive three-star ratings for wine (1985, 1986, 1987) and a four-star rating (the highest) in 1988. In addition, Wine Spectator magazine granted the restaurant four total awards of excellence (1986, 1987, 1988, 1989). Moreover, Sodsook received the "Outstanding Award" from the Dining Professionals of America in 1988 and 1989.
101. For a discussion of the growing appeal of ethnic food and eating healthy among white Americans on a national scale, see Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, chap. 8.
102. Figures are taken from Bruce Schulman, "The Privatization of Everyday Life," in *Living in the Eighties*, ed. Gil Troy and Vincent J. Cannato (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 169.
103. Consella A. Lee, "Healthy Profits: Gym Chains Don't Sweat Recession as Working Out Becomes a Way of Life," *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 1992.
104. Tilakamonkul interview, October 16, 2007.
105. Dosti, Let's Eat Out, *Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 1981.
106. Rose Dosti, Let's Eat Out, *Los Angeles Times*, September 1, 1983.
107. Rose Dosti, "Thai with a Special Tang," Let's Eat Out, *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 1982; Dosti, "Search for LA's Thai Cuisine Pioneers."
108. Tilakamonkul interview, October 16, 2007.
109. Wat Thai of Los Angeles, *Phra Tamrachanuwat* (North Hollywood: Wat Thai of Los Angeles), 151.
110. Aron Seebonruang, interviewed by author, December 16, 2008, North Hollywood, California; Thai Sr. Citizen Club of Los Angeles life history flyer.
111. Disayawattana, "Craft of Ethnic Newspaper-Making," 65.
112. Tilakamonkul interview, October 16, 2007.
113. Kaeonil, *Thai Community in Los Angeles*, 6.
114. Somkiat Cramer, interviewed by author, March 15, 2009, North Hollywood, California.
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116. Ibid.
117. Barry Siegel, "Immigrants' Story Not Always a Tale of Success," *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 1982.
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- Quarterly: Los Angeles and the Future of Urban Cultures* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2005), 284–85.
119. Davis, *City of Quartz*, 227.
120. David Pierson and Anna Gorman, “A New Take on Thai Town,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 2, 2007.
121. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), vii.