

Professional Development

Conference Report: Dan Schulte ThaiCookerySchool Chiang Mai Thailand June 1-4, 2016

Thai Cookery School was the first Thai Cooking School in Chiang Mai Thailand. The school is recognized as a place for Master Chefs to perfect their skills and it also offers classes for beginners. I participated in beginner courses 101-104. Each course is offered as a stand-alone 1 day class, approximately 6 hours long, though some days ran longer. In each course there is a specialized activity and preparation of 6 recipes. As it turned out, my first day I was alone with Chef Tanapon and he added skills from the 5th class as we were able to work one on one. Classes taken were:

CMTCS 101: Introduction to Thai Ingredients

CMTCS 102: Making the Curry Pastes

CMTCS 103: Tour of the Local Market

CMTCS 104: Shopping at the local Market.

Chiang Mai Thai Cookery School also provided participants with a helpful cookbook. The book had specific content on the main ingredients and discussions both in the text and class focus on both the ingredients as well as suitable substitutions when Thai ingredients may be unavailable. All class recipes were combined in the one resource. It was useful to follow in the book and note subtle variations, substitutions and procedural variations.

The location was divided into the student training kitchens, an instructional presentation classroom with a presentation station, and a dining area separated from the cooking region. The training kitchen had approximately 24 stations with a work space, high output gas cooker, wok, cutting area etc. Kitchens were stainless and the entire working area was maintained in a clean and sanitary environment that met our western standards for food safety. Each area had a separate designated hand wash station with design & work flow comparable to a US food prep area.

Classes were broken into several segments. First, an activity. On my first day, since I was the only student on that day, I actually received a bonus training. We did the scheduled review/discussion of Thai ingredients and from class 105, vegetable carving! The Thai ingredient discussion was invaluable. Identification and use of ingredients was the foundation, with additional discussions of flavor profiles/roles in various dishes, substitutions, and recipe modifications based upon personal taste or preferences. One interesting component linked chili temp (mild, medium, hot) to the manner with which chili's are prepared for the dish e.g. whole, crush, mince in addition to quantity.

After the morning activity, typically four dishes were prepared. This was done first in the demonstration kitchen with active discussion. Then hands on preparation in the training kitchens. Tasting and eating followed preparation with a lunch break usually to include dishes #3 & #4. After lunch, two additional preparations that typically included one dessert.

Specific to my coursework were two major areas of focus for me. These were practices of sanitation and safety as it applied to Thai cuisine, and for culinary math both food costing and recipe conversions including US/metric, volume/weight, and both scaling and ratios of recipe items.

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A significant concept in Sanitation and Safety is the Flow of Food wherein food items are evaluated based upon inherent risk (TCS foods) and how those foods move from the source to consumption. A significant concept in food safety and part of a HACCP plan is critical control point. Generally speaking, Thai cooking was introduced as "fast and fresh". What this translates into is that all of the prep and mise en place was critical before cooking. Considering TCS foods, I noted that in the markets the standard for handling meats and seafood was quite different than the US. I noted that meats might be out in the open in a hot environment (temps. Above 35°C) simply set upon crushed ice but not enclosed in any sort of refrigerated case. Granted I did not monitor length of exposure nor actually test the temp, but it was not an environment I common here in the US. Produce was all very fresh and readily available. The notable food safety component is critical control point (CCP). Since the TCS foods were prepared at very high heat, typically meats were slice thin facilitating rapid cooking. While I did not measure the temps, I was going to experiment at home out of curiosity. That said, their burners were very high btu wok burners and the heat transfer greater than my home kitchen. From experience, I felt extremely confident that no TCS foods were served below recommended cooking temps, thus the CCP allowed for nuances in handling during the flow of food without sacrificing net safety of the finished foods.

In class I will be able to site cultural practices that may challenge food safety, identify specific foods used in Thai cuisine and proper handling for safety, and drive home the importance of critical control points as an effective and profoundly important part of a HACCP plan and food safety protocol.

For culinary math I had intended to observe differences in how menu prices were determined but truthfully prices both in markets, food stalls, and restaurants varied radically. In food stalls, vendors typically utilized lower cost ingredients and by selection of products and limiting the volume of more costly protein items, keep costs down. In a food stall, a meal could easily be had for 120-250 THB, approximately \$3-\$6. Given that most of the ingredients were produce or starch, and protein volume kept low, I estimated their food cost percent to be as lower than is common in the US (28-32%) on some dishes. On others, when protein was the primary ingredient such as Mueng Pla Pao (this is a salted whole fish, cooked over a charcoal fire with indirect heat, served with a variety of vegetables & condiments), it was higher. I asked about their cost of the fish and just that ingredient was just over half the price I paid. The significant difference between percentages had to do with the type of operation; food stall vs 'brick & mortar'. Similar variables dictate pricing in the US.

The two areas where I uncovered unexpected teachable content was with volume weight conversions and kitchen ratios. Recipes provided in class were metric as were any recipes I uncovered outside of class. In the school, they provided recipe conversion for each item. However, I found the conversion very suspect. Many recipes differ in their measurement from sale units thus requiring a volume/weight conversion. Typically this is done by using known volume/weight and AP/EP relationships from a data source such as the 'Book of Yields', or a person or operation can perform their own tests. When using either highly trained/skilled workers, yields can be increased. Further, if using unique product data may not be available that is accurate. The downside of doing either yield tests yourself or comparing volume weight is varied. Negative and inaccurate results may come from: limited sample size (as with any

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statistic) and margins of error, variations in types of products, variations in the same product from different sources.

In class, various kitchen ratios were applied to some standard recipes. We then discussed nuances to those ratios as it pertained to personal flavor preference as well as batch size adjustments.

The take away for my classes will be in multiple areas: Food cost percent and evaluating market acceptance of menu pricing (e.g. what can you really charge! Who is your competition!), sourcing volume/weight conversion data & EP/AP yield versus performing independent tests. What are your options? What considerations should be made in evaluating how to achieve good recipe conversions. Lastly, the benefits of kitchen ratios as a methodology to allow recipe scaling easily even in an international culinary arena.

In closing, I now also have something to complete on my American Culinary Federation review for visitation to other culinary schools/institutions!

Mahalo to all who supported my desire to have this experience at the Thai Cookery School.

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