

Since when is pla ra Thai Food?

written by Paul Bierman | April 28, 2018

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Fermented fish, known as *pla ra* in Thai and *pa daek* in Lao, has long been a staple food across Southeast Asia. In Thailand its production and consumption is concentrated in the Isaan region. When it makes its way onto menus across the country it is most often as part of *som tam* at an Isaan restaurant.

When it appeared on the TV cooking show MasterChef Thailand as a surprise ingredient, one contestant fist pumped the air with joy: Kapom, an Isaan farmer from Maha Sarakham. Most of the other contestants were disgusted, but they were also confused because the judges told them that to become the next MasterChef, they had to know how to use “Thai ingredients like *pla ra*”.



Contestants were tasked with “making the best food of their lives” out of the *pla ra* and all the other ingredients found in their Mystery Box. Around the *pla ra* (clockwise from top right) is Japanese (sushi) rice, all-purpose flour, dried shrimp, tamarind paste, pork belly, Japanese cucumber, shallots, basil, raspberries, avocado and bell pepper.

Since when is *pla ra* Thai food? It certainly still isn't for Tong, one of the show's Bangkok contestants, who was particularly disgusted by the *pla ra* and afraid of its potential health effects. One of the show's judges, Chef Pom, asked Tong about his thoughts on *pla ra*.

Chef Pom: “Is it true that you don't like *pla ra*?”

Tong: [lets out a massive sigh]

Chef Pom: "Breathe, Tong."

Tong: "I-I don't like *pla ra* because in Bangkok, the *pla ra* isn't sanitary."

Chef Pom: "You can choose to buy it from a sanitary place and then boil it to get rid of the smell, can't you?"

Tong: "If it was up to me, I would choose not to eat it. If I made it myself, I would be confident about it. But if I went to other places, I would choose not to eat it."

Chef Pom: "Are you confident that you would keep everything clean, or confident in your culinary skill?"

Tong: "Of course [my skill]."

Chef Pom: "We'll see."

One could argue that the disgust for *pla ra* comes from its strong smell and taste, but Tong would never bat an eye at using *pla ra*'s cousin *nam pla* (fish sauce) in his cooking. And as Chef Pom's questioning of Tong makes clear: if Tong was truly worried about the cleanliness of the *pla ra*, he could either source the ingredient from a reliable source, or boil it and remove any possible cause for concern.

So why is Tong so disgusted by *pla ra*? We can look to Thai food history. In-the-know foodies will tell you that *pad thai* is not representative of Thai food, it's "too sweet" and "too bland." What they don't realize is that *pad thai* was promoted by Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram as part of his mid-century efforts to instill Thainess (and promote the consumption of rice noodles) by Thai citizens. At the same time, foods like *pa daek*, languages like Lao, and traditional styles of dress that did not fit into the vision of what a Thai-ified Thailand should look like were marginalized and suppressed.

This was done in spite of the fact that *pa daek* has a long history among Thai and Lao people. Anthropologist [Leedom Lefferts suggests](#) that *pa daek* might be an original food of the wider Tai ethnic group: it can be found not only among Tais in modern day Laos and north and northeastern Thailand, but also among Tais living in Southern China. Lefferts argues that the specific jar used for fermenting fish among Tai peoples is unique to Tai culture, its geographic distribution almost exactly matching the geographic distribution of Tai peoples.

Given the long history of *pa daek* consumption, it shouldn't come as a surprise that Phibun's efforts were not entirely successful. Thai citizens like contestant Kapom who speak Lao and eat *pa daek* are still around. But in more recent history, concern about the risk of cancer from consumption of *pla ra* (which sometimes harbors parasitic liver-flukes) has led to a number of efforts by health authorities to stem raw *pla ra* consumption. Considering this, it's surprising that MasterChef Thailand (primarily sponsored by the agribusiness CP Foods) would call the typically homemade *pla ra* an important Thai ingredient and encourage its use in the kitchen.

Why would there be a sudden embrace of *pla ra* now?

For one, there is the ever-growing global foodie culture, aided by social media and food television. People scour their cities and the world looking for the exotic, unique and most important of all, *authentic* foods that offer both new gustatory experiences, and new ways to show off one's taste on social media.

But even before people were learning what to eat and show it off on Instagram, they were learning about food through television. Television has been glamorizing food for a long time. One of the most famous examples of this is the Iron Chef franchise, which originated in Japan. One of MasterChef Thailand's judges, Chef Ian, has been part of Iron Chef Thailand since its start in 2012. Globally, the Iron Chef franchise has exposed global audiences to foods and food preparations they have never seen before, opening the door for people to be more adventurous with their food.

Anyone who doubts the arrival of global foodie culture in Thailand can look towards the example of Bingsu, Korean shaved ice. In 2015, Bingsu hit Thailand like a tidal wave, showing up showing up in one cafe and Instagram feed after another. It was aided by its chic-Koreanness, often extravagant appearance and the various syrups that can be poured over it to make an enticing Instagram post. Now a Korean dessert that barely existed in Thailand three years ago can be found in cafes across the entire country.

In Bangkok, Isaan food has undergone somewhat of its own craze, with new trendy Isaan restaurants appearing offering upscale re-imaginings of Isaan food. But that isn't enough to explain this embrace of *pla ra* as Thai food. As it turns out, the Thai government is helping spur the embrace of foods that it once demonized.

In 2012, *pla ra* was added to Thailand's Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage. It joined *nam phrik*, *som tam*, and many other Thai cultural products. During the ceremony, Culture Ministry Director Sonthaya Kunplome called the effort "an attempt to prevent the loss of Thai cultural heritage and immunize children against the influence of foreign cultures."

So rather than being considered something not-Thai and better off avoided, *pla ra* is being promoted in order to diminish foreign influence. Aside from the fact that it would be nice for *pla ra* to be reconsidered on its own merit and not its potential use for nationalist ends, I think there is another problem with this plan: It simply does not understand Thai food.

Dr. Vasina Chandrasiri at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University wrote an article outlining how to preserve Thai food culture. She argues for promoting food like *pla ra* with foreign audiences, to help strengthen demand and support both at home and abroad, much like has been done. One of her best points is that Thai cuisine is made up of unique regional cuisines, which each use different ingredients and methods based on environment and history. To be reductive about it: Northern Thai food has its unique spices, Isaan food has its *pla ra*, central Thai food has its Chinese influence, and southern Thai food has its seafood and coconut milk- based curries. Declaring *pla ra* Thai food ignores that *pla ra* is important now because it is a cornerstone of Isaan people's food and culture. How can a plan to preserve a culture work when it's not even aimed at the right one?

Thailand might find more success looking at the European Union's systems of geographical indication and traditional specialties, which rather than declare a food important because it is important to a country, recognize a food as an important part of a regional culture, or even a specific community. This would require accepting the importance of Thailand's regional diversity, and accepting that things don't have to be Thai to be important to Thailand.

I would be happy to live in a world where contestants on MasterChef Thailand were told that they needed to know how to cook using Isaan ingredients like *pa daek*.