

Tourism and Sustainable Development**The Experience Economy in Thai Hotels and Resort Clusters: The Role of Authentic Food**Thanan Apivantanaporn¹, John Christopher Walsh²

Abstract: This paper explores the relevance of authentic Thai food in contributing to the experience economy in Thai hotels and resort clusters. Although hotels and other tourist institutions in Thailand have been making some sporadic attempts to incorporate specifically Thai food and beverage (F&B) elements into their overall product offering, this has rarely been attempted in a thoughtful and systematic manner, despite the importance of F&B in determining overall levels of customer satisfaction and the importance attached to incorporating ‘Thainess’ into the hotel and tourism industry. This paper draws on qualitative research and personal observation undertaken in a wide range of Thai hotels with a view to identifying emergent value-adding clusters in the domestic hospitality sector. The paper describes and categorizes the uses of Thai F&B currently and identifies shortcomings in industry vision, which leads to recommendations for both hotel and resort managers and also to those responsible for national level tourism development efforts. The paper also recognizes the problematic nature of the concepts of ‘authenticity’ in this context and attempts to reconcile differing conceptions. The paper contributes to improving the quality and value of Thai hotels in the larger tourism industry.

Keywords: hospitality; Thailand; tourism

JEL Classifications: L83; M31

1. Introduction

Thailand is seeking to escape the Middle Income Trap by restructuring its economy and taking more advantage of the possibilities offered by the creative and knowledge economies. In terms of one of its more visible industries and one which is particularly important in earning foreign currency, that is tourism, incorporating creative economy elements entails drawing upon added value in the various components of the tourists’ experience. This has been approached with an eye for

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authenticity, not only because the panoply of Thai cultural features and institutions is widely held among decision makers in the country to be a source of genuine competitive advantage but also because that advantage is thought to be sustainable. In other words, including elements of authentic Thai culture into the tourism experience will not only be a way of raising margins but also a means of distinction for competitor destinations. Within the overall mix of goods and services that make up the tourist experience, the food and beverages (F&B) sector is of particular importance because it is a sector tourists cannot avoid, because it represents a significant proportion of daily expenditure and because it is a convenient means of adding value to basic products by drawing upon local expertise and supplies, which have the advantage of being comparatively low-cost, especially in comparison with the costs incurred in providing international best practice with respect to international cuisine.

Thai food already has a good reputation around the developed world and a large number of restaurants have opened, giving people the opportunity to try staples of the Thai table. In a survey by CNN of the world's 50 most delicious foods, five Thai dishes were included, *tom yum kung*, *nam tok moo*, *som tam*, *phad tai* and the overall winner *massaman* curry. Tourists are familiar with these kinds of dishes and generally interested in trying them in an authentic setting and preferably without having to pay premium import prices. Another survey, the Visa and Asia Pacific Travel Intention Survey, 2010, indicated that the main reason given by visitors for visiting Thailand was for the Thai food (61%), followed by prices (60%), shopping opportunities (54%), natural attractions (54%) and unique cultural features (49% - this was a multiple choice question and respondents could select more than one answer). It is certainly true that F&B related issues regularly feature in strategic plans for industry development and economic development generally in such top-level bodies as the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) and the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). However, that level of interest and appreciation has not yet been incorporated into the product offerings of Thai hoteliers and related resort managers. Few seem to understand the awareness of Thai F&B features or of Thai cultural institutions among the international tourism market and, therefore, are not well-placed to be able to take advantage of it. Instead, most follow patterns of standardization that are common in other multinational industries in which a common service pattern and service mentality are employed as a means of benchmarking employee performance, regularizing product offerings and reducing costs of inputs. It is apparent that there is a mismatch, therefore, between the opportunities apparently available from accessing elements of the Experience Economy as part of tourists' experience of Thai tourism and the product offerings currently made available. It would be beneficial to the industry and the economy as a whole if some means were to be found that could close this gap. F&B elements will be crucial additions to the marketing mix in fixing the gap.

This situation has yielded three basic research questions to be addressed by this study, which are as follows:

1. To what extent, if any, are Thai F&B incorporated into the unique value proposition offered by various hotels in important destinations around the country?
2. How are Thai F&B elements articulated and demonstrated as part of guests' experiential cultural discovery?
3. To what extent, if at all, do guests perceive Thai F&B as offering a value added service?

The current study attempts to provide some answers to these questions as part of a larger attempt to understand how the Thai tourism industry may be used to contribute to the knowledge and creative economies and, thereby, participate in the exit from the Middle Income Trap. To do this, the paper now continues with a brief literature review outlining the various concepts that are considered in this project, moves on to a description of the methodology employed to collect data and then, in the second part of the paper, the principal findings are described and discussed and then recommendations are drawn from the findings observed. The paper is then concluded, with a brief acknowledgement of what is known about the subject to date and how future research may be used to contribute to an improvement in the situation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Food and Beverages in the Tourism Experience

Food and beverages (F&B) consists of all the services provided to guests within hotels or other forms of tourist-based accommodation intended to make a profit. It includes those elements provided as part of the tourism package, that is inclusive breakfasts and complimentary room products, as well as elements provided above and beyond the package, including in-room and facility dining, external shows and events incorporating F&B and so forth. There are various models of marketing both these forms of F&B and many forms of practice have resulted in the adoption of international best practice as a means of dealing with variability in local labour forces and as a result of the internationalization of hotel management and management norms in the field. In general terms, this has meant that standardization has been based on an international norm or, perhaps more accurately, a small set of international norms, as symbolized most clearly in breakfast buffets which are divided, very broadly, between Continental, American and Asian. It is possible to find selections based on other ethnicities (e.g. Indian, Arabic) but only in specific locations. Instead, F&B items from 'exotic' locations – that is, not from the core areas – have been incorporated into the basic offering. For

at least two decades, therefore, exotic cuisine has become an increasingly important part of the international tourism experience and act as multi-impersonal motivators (McIntosh *et al.*, 1995). In other words, exotic F&B presented in a safe and hygienic manner acts by itself to attract many tourists, without it having to be spelled out exactly what kinds of dishes are likely to be made available. It has been argued that tourists are also able via these means to gain some insights into social relations of food production and an entry into an authentic travel experience by trying exotic cuisine (Fields, 2002). Consequently, gastronomic tourism, whether from an instrumental or an incidental perspective, has become an increasingly common field of study for tourism scholars (Boniface, 2003; Cohen & Evieli, 2004; Hall & Sharples, 2003; Hjalager & Richards, 2002). As the tourism industry matures in various aspects, it has become evident that exotic F&B have become part of an alternative paradigm to the sun-and-sand holiday. There may be some crossover between the two but the concept of authenticity represents a point of bifurcation with the comfort seekers, who might like to see a little hint of exoticism on the menu but not have to be confronted with it in reality.

2.2. Culture

This paper concerns itself with the notion of Thai culture from an authentic perspective. The authenticity aspect will be considered below; here, it is necessary to consider the nature of culture. This is a complex issue inasmuch as every different field of study takes a somewhat different view of culture and has devoted considerable effort in expounding and unpacking the concepts contained within the definition that suits it. This paper is rooted in a management paradigm and, consequently, takes a definition of culture that has been exercised within management studies. Perhaps the most influential of these is provided by Hofstede (e.g. Hofstede, 1984), who described culture in terms of the impact that it has on the way that people behave, that the behaviour of people is within reason predictable given understanding of the cultural underpinning and that it is further possible to identify recognisable patterns within overall behaviour that are further explicable with respect to additional typologies of cultural impact. In this respect, the work of Maslow is rightly considered of the highest rank. He described a hierarchical pyramid of desires, with the lowest level of safety and food, with higher levels of better quality of life, personal relationships, self-fulfilment and up to the level of self-actualisation (Maslow, 1987). As a result, management studies tends to focus on a model of cultural practice that is, on the one hand, inclusive of some people and exclusive of others and, on the other hand, manifested in forms of behaviour in terms of norms, beliefs and values (Peters and Waterman, 2004). This is a definition that is characteristic of management studies in that it maximizes operational value at the expense, if necessary, of sophisticated, nuanced niceties. This is the definition of culture that will be used in the current paper.

2.3. Authenticity

The contemporary notion of authenticity has its roots in existential philosophy, in which it is considered to be the ability and willingness of a person to live true to her or his own nature. One way to judge whether a person, including the self, is living in an authentic manner is by judging the nature of production or work. Theodor Adorno highlighted the problems attendant on trying and failing to live an authentic life (2002). The issue was further analysed by Walter Benjamin (1999), who argued that since art in the modern age (the 'age of mechanical reproduction') is radically different from art created in the past, the way of considering art should also be treated differently and should be based, primarily, on politics. This difference is represented by the concept of modernity or modernization: "To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are (Berman, 1988:15). From a management perspective, this definition of modernism will immediately bring to mind Schumpeter's (2010) description of capitalism as being a form of 'creative destruction.' Both modernization and capitalism result in the creation of new ideas, new concepts and new products which come into being by changing, deforming, transforming and eradicating the past. All that is solid, in other words, turns into air. As part of the contemporary commercial experience, therefore, tourism products should be read and interpreted with respect to a political understanding of the production process and the social relations of production. The authenticity of the tourism process depends, therefore, both on the degree to which an accurate model of the production process is embedded in the products and services offered and is also represented in the moment of consumption. However, it is known that in the context of tourism, genuine authenticity is rarely to be found so much as 'staged authenticity' (MacCannell, 1973). There will always be a gap between staged and genuine authenticity, given the nature of contemporary tourism, although an extensive treatment of this subject is beyond the scope of the current paper.

2.4. The Experience Economy

The concept of the experience economy is found in the work of Pine and Gilmore (1999), although it has of course been in practice for a much longer period of time. The premise is that people will enjoy a consumption process to a greater extent if all of their senses are engaged with the performance of providing the good or service involved. This means that each product offering should be part of a theatrical performance for which a premium fee can be charged. The relationship

between the performance in reality and the act represented from an authentic perspective is clearly problematic. The commercial perspective requires that an experience must be relevant and meaningful and incorporate features such as novelty, surprise and learning (Poulsson and Kale, 2004). There have nevertheless been attempts to link the experience economy concepts to operational tourism experiences (Oh, Fiore and Jeoung, 2007), which indicates that some researchers at least believe that the gap is not insurmountable.

3. Methodology

This study is based on a programme of qualitative research that has been conducted as part of a larger doctoral research project relating to the experience economy in boutique hotels in the tourism industry in Thailand. A total of 30 face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted with a variety of hoteliers, hotel experts and consultants, TAT research director, foreign and domestic guests and members of the judges' panel of the Thailand Boutique Hotel Award, 2011. Interviews followed a semi-structured approach that enabled respondents to explore issues of interest to them and not be involved with irrelevant areas. Each interview was, therefore, different. Areas of exploration within the overall body of interviewing included the extent to which Thai F&B product offerings are incorporated within value propositions within hotels, how Thai F&B product offerings are articulated and demonstrated within the experiential and cultural discovery of guests within hotels and the extent to which guests perceived Thai F&B product offerings to be value-added services.

The qualitative interviewing has been supported by a literature review of secondary data and, also, an intensive exploration of relevant websites displaying Thai F&B content as hotel offerings. Thirdly, researchers participated in and observed hotel dining sites and venues at a range of hotel dining sites and venues and, in particular, at the Sukothai Historical Park

Extensive note-keeping and transcription of interviews (which took place in both Thai and English as necessary) contributed to a database that was subsequently interrogated using content analysis techniques. Outputs included the categorization of hotels according to their mode of offering Thai F&B within a typology of different strategies, categorization of guests' experiential engagement and understanding of perceived value received by customers.

4. Findings

Currently, the use of Thai F&B can be categorized into three types of business model:

1st Model: these are hotels or resorts which continue to provide typical offerings that mainly focus on the room's 'core value' and other stereotypes (auxiliary) services. Thai F&B is not highly enhanced or incorporated into the hotel's conceptual offering. Hotels in this category are often typical city centre businesses, with important meeting venue services and food offerings very much matching the industry standard of American breakfast and international lunch and dinner options. This group of hotels focuses on providing meeting facilities, equipment and general variety of food, with care taken to provide parking space. For those hotels also located in tourist attraction areas can also provide some local tourist activity services. This type of hotel represents the bulk of the industry in Thailand and they are examples of red ocean swimmers in that they lack product uniqueness but are characterized by adherence to industry standards.

2nd Model: these hotels or resorts feature different offerings from the first type and they tend to provide a hybrid model of F&B provision. That is, they might provide added value service to the guest experience from a variety of components, which may include featuring Thai F&B and some location-specific features. For example, there are hotels that offer typical American breakfast supplemented by local specialities such as *khao soi* or *khanom jeen* in the north and north-east or, in the south, *dim sum* and Trang coffee, together with grilled pork skewers. These features supplement the core services and are additions to them rather than substitutes. The hotel's core values are still to be found in the rooms, the meeting venues and equipment and facilities. One example of this approach is found at the Amphawa Resort and Spa in Samut Songkhran province, which has a core offering of meeting facilities combined with local tourist attractions but the hotel restaurant has a strong reputation locally for its use of the *pla-too* fish (mackerel), which is a renowned delicacy of the Central region and one which is not easy to find elsewhere. The location-specific *pla-too* fish dishes are aimed at creating a sense of location-specific authenticity. This second type of hotel is becoming more common as new small and boutique hotels are being opened by entrepreneurs who understand the need to differentiate their product and to articulate its uniqueness. F&B offerings are considered to be part of a holistic experience that might also feature such elements as hotel architecture, story and legacy, as well as other added-value lifestyle activities.

3rd Model: this category features F&B services as part of the core offering and as representatives of key service values. This type of hotel positions itself as a destination with innovative ambience, authenticity and a distinctive food menu. They are places that attempt to articulate local stories and legacy through staff

members, ambience, service, architecture and tourist related activities that, together, aim to engage all five of the senses. Thai F&B are highly integrated into the core values of the hotel and guests are also able to participate in food presentation, cookery lessons, trips to local food producers and farmers' markets and so forth. One example of this is the Sukhothai Treasure Resort and Spa, which features a spectacular dinner experience within the setting of the private and exclusive cultural dining facility within the Sukhothai Historical Park. Guests can enjoy what is presented as authentic northern style Thai food within the heritage-based environment. It is a form of staged authenticity, of course.

This third type positions itself as a destination not only for the purpose of the room but also for the purpose of cultural exchange activities and a holistic approach. Food is used as a means of becoming a cultural gateway to understanding a different culture and its identity in a sustainable manner (Hale and Mitchell, 2000). This type of hotel aims at being a niche competitor with specific customers quite different from the generic or semi-generic approaches of the preceding two models. While the first two models follow basic push and pull motivational factors in seeking to attract customers (Crompton, 1997; Yuan and McDonald, 1997; Uysal and Hagan, 1993), the third type relies on a higher order of motivation according to the Maslovian hierarchy of desires. The destination is portrayed according to a theatrical metaphor in which there are four critical elements: actors; audience; setting and performance (Fisk and Bitner, 1992). The model uses a theoretical business framework as a stage and every place is the theatre (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). The key success factors are based on harmony and consistency of manner and tone as part of a 'creative value chain.' An additional factor is that each hotel in this category can make a claim to having cultural capital of some sort. For example, the Rachamarkara Hotel at Chiang Mai features spectacular architecture in the Tai Yai style and the menu boasts Tai Yai specialities as a means of promoting cultural values.

Table 2. Range of Experiential Engagement Activities Available to Guests

Experiential Engagement Activities	
1	Chef cooking demonstration
2	Unique food decoration performance
3	Cookery lessons
4	Trips to local food producers and farmers' markets
5	Personal cooking and selecting own ingredients from local sources
6	Dining experience in a cultural and historical environment
7	Dining experience with culturally-infused dramatic performances and dances
8	Selection of Thai regional dishes with local fresh fruit and Thai desserts for breakfast menu; typical menu is the American breakfast and western bakery items with local pineapples, papayas and water melons
9	Local set menu features home-made regional dishes while typical hotels offer stereotyped and generic menu selections

Source: Original research

5. Discussion

In the table below (see Table 2), customer engagement is categorized in three levels along the vertical axis, indicating the three business models identified above. Across the horizontal axis, three columns itemize the degree of customer engagement, from low to high and, also, columns for both customer perceived value and the competitive business model.

Table 3. Degrees of Customer Engagement

Hotel Model Type	High-Customer Engagement	Medium-Customer Engagement	Low-Customer Engagement	Customer Perceived Value	Competitive Business Model
1st Model			X	Nothing New	Commoditized Service
2nd Model		X		New Learning Experience	Value-Added Service
3rd Model	X			Extraordinary Experience	Value Creation

Source: Original Research

The hotel or resort business model is largely dependent on the relevant firm's market positioning and strategy, while the perceptions of customers of the value of F&B offerings can become crucial competitive inputs and the value added can differentiate the overall product offering. Consequently, there is a definite need for the infrastructure of capital-cultural resources and the knowledge and understanding provided can capitalize the theoretical framework with respect to both dramaturgical and theatrical metaphors.

6. Recommendations

For the government, it should consider highlighting and branding the culinary industry within the framework of the creative and cultural economy, with various ministries involved: the Culture Ministry would preserve and conserve authentic marks of cultural history, the Industry Ministry would be involved in strengthening products and services, with standardization of production also an important issue; meanwhile, the Tourism Ministry and TAT should be involved in promoting culinary tourism and the Public Health Ministry would be concerned with food safety and hygiene. Finally, the Science and Technology Ministry would organize research and development of new and heritage products and the Agriculture Ministry would be responsible for upgrading upstream agricultural production in terms of both quality and quantity. The role of government accords with what has already been written in the literature. For example, the government's role in highlighting and branding the 'culinary tourism' as part of the creative and cultural

economy concepts has been addressed (Handsuh, 2000; Bernard and Zaragoza, 1999; Hjalager and Corigliano, 2000; Bessiere, 1998; Cusack, 2000). The purpose of culinary expression as a means of gaining attention from tourists has also been described (Santich, 1998; Macdonald, 2001; Bessiere, 1998), as has its role in improving industrial competitiveness (Crouch and Ritchie, 1999) and creating distinct added value at a preferred destination (Telfer & Wall, 1996; Handsuh, 2000).

Meanwhile, at the firm level, hotel management should consider:

1. What knowledge they require in order to incorporate creative and cultural capital into their competitive business models.
2. How to incorporate the practical framework of dramaturgy and the theatre metaphor.
3. How to bring hotel staff to a position in which they can access location-specific knowledge and ability to prepare and present food as required.
4. In order to cater for more diversified target segments, the Thai Culinary sector should be further developed to enable the creation of a wider range of dining outlets. Thai fusion food should be highlighted and developed so that it becomes more creative and dynamic such that it becomes an internationally-renowned brand that does not remain static in its originality.

Although the F&B sector has been receiving some attention in research concerned with tourism, F&B as a pull factor generally has seen little attention. It is suggested that Thai F&B be considered as a value-added service that seeks to distinguish competitive advantage over other, non-unique hotels. In truth, conventional accommodation outlets in Thailand have long competed on the basis of undifferentiated products and services such as the hotel and room facilities, albeit in connection with leading edge architectural design (which is a common fascination among Thai entrepreneurs) combined with mostly dull, standard F&B selections irrespective of wherever the hotel might be located: pineapple, water melon and papaya are always found (and usually found alone) on the buffet tables despite the incredible richness of selection of fruits available in Thailand.

However, it should not be taken for granted that simply providing authentic Thai F&B would be sufficient for creating a successful pull factor for hotels in the country. Not only should it be considered in a mature and sophisticated manner but the element of cultural expression should be demonstrated both in the tangible aspects of the physical production of dishes but also in the intangible aspects of experience, memory and satisfaction. In this context, the underlying paradigm of the dramaturgical experience economy, including the actor-audience-script-setting construct, will be an important theme in delivering a (so it is to be hoped) delightful experience. These features are brought together at the dining experience

brought together at the Sukothai Historical Park. The experience is demonstrably inauthentic in that it bears little if any relationship with an appropriate consideration of the social relations of F&B production (such things might be found to a slightly greater extent in some home-stay experiences). However, as staged authenticity, it does its job in pulling in domestic and international tourists, neither of which may be expected to have any meaningful understanding of Thai history.

Table 4. Roles for the Public Sector in Promoting Culinary Industry in the Experience Economy

Task	Agency
Preserve and conserve values and authenticity	Ministry of Culture
Standardise and upgrade quality of products and services	Ministry of Industry
Promotion and branding of culinary tourism	TAT/Tourism Ministry
Assure food safety and hygiene standards	Ministry of Public Health
R&D on food innovation and technology	Ministry of Science and Technology
Increasing agricultural yields through developing and importing advanced technology in seeding, planting and harvesting	Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives

Source: Original Research

Table 5. Roles for the Private Sector in Promoting Culinary Industry in the Experience Economy

Area of Management	of Hotel Practice
Knowledge management organization	Cultural resources (food or culinary culture) will need to be accumulated and sustained through creativity and innovation
Experience and dramaturgical approach	Capitalizing on the theme of actor-audience-script-setting and incorporating these into the best show performance for a memorable experience
Marketing and branding	Strategic positioning in terms of art and culture, ways of life, beliefs and rituals is set for unique and differentiated service design and marketing campaign
Human resource engagement	Hotel staff must be able to access food knowledge and be trained in food processing, food presentation, food preservation and the use of food as storytelling
Food technology and innovation	To broaden its existing market penetration so as to become an internationally renowned food icon, the Thai fusion food style should be addressed from a more creative and dynamic perspective. Consequently, the public and private sector cooperative issues need to be addressed.

Source: Original Research

It is clear that these goals can only really be achieved by means of collaboration between the private and public sectors.

7. Conclusion

From the findings described in this paper, it is evident that (staged) authentic Thai F&B have become one of the more significant ingredients involved in enhancing the cultural content of tourists' experience in Thailand. This sector can become, therefore, an important means of distinguishing hotels from generic competitors employing F&B merely as a form of supplementary service in the business model. This paper suggests that Thai hoteliers have, to date, rarely capitalized effectively on well-known examples of Thai cuisine, which has achieved a stellar reputation in the international tourism journalist media. This is despite the fact that there is a growing demand in tourists' desire and motivation for cuisine-based resort travel (Santich, 1998; Macdonald, 2001; Bessiere, 1998). However, there are some parts of the overall industry which have recognized the importance of F&B in the overall product offering and these efforts are to be encouraged with the appropriate level of institutional support. Longitudinal research will assist in determining whether the hotels looking forward in this manner are gaining in success and relevance or not.

This paper represents an exploratory study of Thai hotels in this category. It is limited by narrowness of scope and ability with respect to time and place. More research will assist in broadening understanding of the issues involved to a greater extent. The need for genuine authenticity in production throughout the Thai economy is, in particular, an important potential stimulus for future growth in moving beyond the Middle Income Trap.

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