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Why do Tourists Attend Cooking Classes? Some Indications from Thailand

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Abstract

This study sought motivations of tourists attending Thai cooking classes in the tourist city of Bangkok and tourist resorts of Krabi and Rayong. This was particularly so that cooking schools could align their future marketing efforts around the most potent customer attractants for touristic cooking schools, for instance stressing that student groups are multi-national. The study proceeded from the phenomenological assumption that those closest to a phenomenon know about it best. There were no hypotheses from the researcher. The methodological approach was Qualitative. Students were interviewed at the end of their classes. Interviews were of two types, totally open-ended discussion between participants, other participants and interviewer and very rigidly structured individual interviews. Observation was also used and there were two levels of involvement with school owner/managers, informal discussion and formal interviews. For one cookery school, its TripAdvisor reviews were text-mined for cross-reference with interviews at that school for further confirmation or otherwise of findings and to assess the viability of text-mining reviews to inferentially discover client motivations. The body of evidence assembled on balance indicated students being motivated primarily by cultural learning rather than gaining cooking skills. Sociability was also highly important.

Key words

Thailand, cooking schools, cooking classes, tourist experiences, experience economy

JEL Codes: M3, Z1, Z3

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1. Introduction

The GfK report (“Preferred Vacation Type”) on global tourism preferences reports that 59% of people prefer a relaxing holiday, meaning not doing much at all, whereas 35% want to be active. Being active does not only refer to skiing, zip-lining or white-water rafting. Many prefer a more leisured version of “active”. “Food tourism is all the rage”, claims Wolf (2017). That may, of course mean tucking away the daily meals, albeit, perhaps, in a selective way from tourists working their way through Guide Michelin to working their way around the street food stalls of Bangkok, for which there’s also a guide (Nualkhair, 2011). In addition to keeping physically sustained at whatever level, far more is on offer. There are food and wine tours, be they escorted or self-drive. There are tea and coffee plantation visits, wine, beer and cognac tastings, guided or self-guided tours to particular food and beverage stores, food stalls or carts, visiting farmers’ markets or farms and farm shops. The list goes on and includes cooking schools aimed at tourists.

The economic value of all these possibilities remains essentially unquantified, but it is estimated that visitors spend 25% of their travel budget on food and beverage (Wolf, 2017). That is a reference to tourists in general, the figures likely to be considerably higher for those who have come to be defined as “foodies” in just sustaining themselves, let alone joining specific activities such as cookery classes. The figures are enticing. Thai Tourism Authority, for instance, has consistently promoted food-based tourism to Thailand through such campaigns as “Thailand: Kitchen of the World”, “Amazing Thai Food”, “Thailand Splash and Spice Festival”. Thailand’s international tourist arrivals were 35.38 million people in 2017 (“Thai tourism on growth”). Many other countries are also very aware of the efficacy of the food tourism formula, using it as a major element in their tourism offerings and promotions, Ireland and Australia coming easily to mind.

2. Literature review

From the outset the researcher faced difficulties in that there appear to have been few studies of cookery schools for tourists, either in Thailand or elsewhere, as opposed to professional training schools. A major exception is Sharples (2004). Bell (2015) is another honourable exception, but overall the researcher had to be adaptive in turning to the greater generality of culinary tourism, and to the even broader contexts of cultural tourism and leisure though the Bell (2015) study of the warung cooking schools of Bali is in territory reasonably analogous to most Thai cookery schools for tourists. The vast majority of Thai schools tend to be relatively downscale in their pricing (at Thai Baht 900-1200, occasionally 1500, per class of four hours, sometimes a little less) and though with attentive service, do not offer sumptuous surroundings, or even, in some cases, uncrowded surroundings. The latter, though, brings its own authenticity, aided by the fact that some

of the schools in Bangkok are actually located within local wet markets. Old houses are also increasingly popular venues. Sharples (2004) considers many aspects of cooking schools in holidays. Some of her considerations relate mostly to whole holidays taken at a cooking school, in short a special interest holiday, quite different from the researcher's focus on courses of a few hours, perhaps half a day through to a whole day. Within the trade, as little as half hour duration, single recipe classes are being developed, for their ability to fit into crowded itineraries.

It is, presumably, safe to assume that more skills are acquired on a week-long immersion course, complete with accommodation, with attendees usually pre-existently having a fairly deep interest in food, maybe having had fairly substantial exposure and involvement in its preparation, than on shorter courses. Nonetheless, Sharples (2004) always seems to see education as trumped by hedonism. She says recreational courses taught at cookery schools are "primarily aimed at the leisure market" (Sharples 2004). Using the term hedonistic, though, is not in any way to trivialise the cookery courses, long or short. The use of leisure time, in this case food-related, is an important determinant of "who you are and how you interact with society" (Sharples 2004). This is part of the argument over food as a social and cultural marker and differentiator, along with food as a centrepiece of human sociability. Currently a battle of words is raging in the USA around mayonnaise out of an article by Hingston (2018). Apparently, mayonnaise, helped also by Mahdawi (2018), may be both an expression of and contributor to inter-age group and inter-ethnic difficulties in USA.

Barthes saw food as a differentiator, a marker of social and cultural difference in this way. He looked, for instance (Barthes, 2008) at the snack bar and snack as against the business lunch in terms of the different signals each give off, signalling as he has it, around the same activity of taking a meal, ingesting foods and beverages, and likely doing so at lunchtime. Such signalling might be a strong, purposeful, or just underlying intent of attendees on cooking courses, including short, touristic, cookery courses. Perhaps attending such courses is, in a post-Bourdieu, contemporary view, building cultural capital (Cole, 2018), indicating one's cultural competence and interests and thereby placing oneself in terms of social standing or at least social group membership. Of course, that is social capital for a social milieu deemed desirable by the individual. Cole (2018) speaks of a "signal to those around us what kind of and how much cultural capital we possess, and in turn, steward our continued acquisition of it".

Looking at Balinese cooking schools, including the warung cooking schools (meaning home-based cooking schools), Bell (2015) considers the cultural capital involved in terms of culinary tourism which she defines as "the notion of tourists experiencing the culture of a destination through its food". Shenoy (2005) has spoken of the opportunity for "cultural omnivores" to accumulate ever more cultural capital through food. This can happen in various ways. Long (2004) mentions all areas of participation in food, to include consumption, but also preparation and presentation of the host cuisine. Everett (2012) specifically mentions the role of cooking schools. Bell (2015) summarises for her participant observation of the warung cooking schools that the proximity to ordinary everyday life is what guests' value. Specifically, Bell (2015) says that the lessons felt like "friends cooking together" and that despite no common language "curiosity about each others' food and culture made conversation easy". It is possible to talk about co-creating valuable experience (Prebensen and Foss 2011). Participants are active contributors along with tutors and other course attendees. Interestingly, Bell (2015) never mentions gaining technical skills.

The researcher felt that the gaining of cooking skills on short cooking courses for tourists (defined as a maximum of one day, but more likely three to four hours) has gone essentially unconsidered, represents a research gap. Equally, though, research around the role of both wanting to gain and actually gaining cultural insight through attending short cooking courses for tourists has been limited. It was felt that these matters, together with assessing the role of simple sociability begged further research and for that to be set in the widest possible context for research participants. The research question in this study was straightforwardly what motivates tourists to attend tourist-orientated cooking school classes in Thailand, an important destination for this tourist activity? There is global interest in Thai food. The schools aim to singularly present and teach about Thai cooking. There is a plethora of cooking schools in Thailand aimed at the tourist demographic. Answering the research question is critical to understanding a market that has been little considered. Only then can marketing activity to that market be directed to achieving optimum results. Tourist cookery course providers are currently faced not simply by a gap in available research, but arguably a total void. School managements have been kept informed of this survey's results.

3. Methodology of research

This survey was conducted solidly in the phenomenological tradition of seeking to interview or observe those closest to the phenomenon (Davison, 2013), in this case participants on Thai tourist cooking classes in Bangkok and Krabi during July 2018 and school owners/managers in January 2019. There was also some discussion with managements of various schools and with students. The researcher proceeded by an inductive approach. There were no pre-determined theories or

hypotheses. The aim was to proceed with rich information from the interviewees' perspective rather than moving forward from the researcher's perspective. Where tightly structured this was done for pragmatic reasons to get some shape to responses, maybe responses at all, in an environment where English language was the usage, with the cooking lessons being conducted in English, but English skills could in fact be highly variable, given such a multi-national customer base. The totality of approaches in this survey was:

- Informal discussion with owner/managers and students throughout attendances, directed at ascertaining attendance motives of students. This was highly unstructured, free-ranging conversation with whole class groups, pairs and individuals.
- General observation of classes, watching for behaviours and listening to comments indicative of student attendance motives.
- Formal qualitative interviews of students, based from a highly-structured question set, covering their motives for attending the class.
- Text-mining of Trip Advisor reviews for one cooking school for comparison against students' interview responses at that school.
- Formal semi-structured qualitative interviews with school owner/managers as to their view of student class attendance motives. As a matter of intention, some of the owner/managers had provided students for the study, whereas some had not.

4. Data analysis and results

As explained, a number of qualitative data-gathering techniques were used in this study, many highly conversational, some observational, but the core data-gathering was by interview, especially of student participants. That group of student participants constituted forty-three attendees at Thai cooking classes aimed specifically at tourists. The forty-three participants were randomly available clients on random days at three cooking schools in Bangkok and Krabi, two tourist destinations in Thailand. Basic demographic data about the forty-three participants included that ten nationalities participated, among them nationals of USA (53.5%), South Korea (11.6%), Chile (9.3%), Singapore (7.0%), New Zealand and Germany (4.7% each). Concerning gender, 53.5% were female and 46.5% male. Most participants fell within the age group 15-24 years (60.5%), followed by the participants falling within the band 25-34 years at 16.3%. The age groups 35-44 years and 45-54 years were less present at 7% and 4.7% respectively. Participants in the age range 55-64 years constituted 9.3% of the group. Finally, one participant fell within the age range 66-74 years.

A sub-set of the wider group of forty-three was particularly considered. These eleven participants were attendees at a particular cooking school. This group received additional consideration so that it could be used for comparison against text-mining of TripAdvisor reviews of the particular school (comparable text-mining for all schools surveyed would have involved thousands of TripAdvisor reviews, such is their popularity). Two main nationalities were involved, Chilean (36.4%) and Singaporean (27.3%). Gender was 63.6% male, 36.4% female. Age categories within this group were that 45.5% fell within the age range 15-24 years, 36.4% within the age range 55-64 years, 35-44 years 9.1% and 66-74 years 9.1%.

The questions asked of the group of forty-three students in the most structured part of the survey were designed to elicit responses to a range of motivational statements. Responses were categorised as strongly agreeing the proposition, somewhat agreeing the proposition, somewhat disagreeing the proposition and strongly disagreeing the proposition. The questions fell into three broad areas, questions about learning aims, questions about sociability aims and questions about personal developmental aims, as per table 1 below:

Table 1. Question areas and questions for cooking school students in their highly-structured qualitative interviews

LEARNING

Attended to Learn New Cooking Skills?

Attended to Learn About Another Culture through Food?

Attended to Learn About Another Culture through General Chat?

SOCIABILITY

Attended to Meet New People?

Attended to enjoy the creation of Food and taking a Meal with Others?

Attended to Enrich Relationships with Existing Friends and Family?

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Attended to Elevate or Confirm the Ability to Communicate with those of Other Cultures?

Attended to Elevate or Confirm the ability to Communicate with New People?

Attended to Elevate or Confirm the Ability to Enjoy the Company of those of Other Cultures?

Attended to Elevate or Confirm the Ability to enjoy the company of New People?

Attended to Elevate or Confirm the Ability to Find Personal Space among Others?

To consider the full group's response on learning is interesting. The majority of participants strongly or somewhat agreed with the statements. With a mean of 3.65 to learn about another culture through food was first in rank order. Indeed, that proposition had the highest number of strongly agreed endorsements for any learning proposition at thirty. In respect of sociability the majority of participants also strongly or somewhat agreed to the propositions. With a mean of 3.60 the leader in rank order was enjoying the creation of food and taking a meal with others. Twenty-three respondents recorded this as strongly agreed. Meeting new people and enriching existing relationships both showed a mean score of 3.47. The results on personal development were much as to be expected given the previous patterns. Firstly, all propositions were either strongly or somewhat agreed by the majority of participants. Secondly, the rank order was led by responses on elevating and confirming the ability to enjoy the company of those of other cultures, with a mean score of 3.71. Elevating and confirming the ability to enjoy the company of new people was second in rank order with a mean score of 3.63.

Gender and nationality showed no significant difference in agreeing the learning-related statements. Gender was also not significant around sociability, though it was around personal development in that women were somewhat less positive about elevating or confirming the ability to find personal space among others. Nationality was important around sociability. Particularly the German nationals scored low, a mean of 1.00, on enriching existing relationships, against say the Chileans scoring at 4.00. Nationality also showed around personal development. For instance the Singaporeans scored low (a mean of 2.67) around elevating and confirming the ability to communicate with those of other cultures. Americans scored relatively low around the ability to find personal space among others (a mean of 2.82).

There was also a question as to whether participants only attend cooking school on holiday or elsewhere as well, the majority answer to which was holiday attendance only. Some explained this as relating not to lack of desire to attend cooking school at other times, but lack of time in their ordinary routine of home and school (interestingly, other claims on time, such as the gym, were not mentioned). Of course some had never even thought of cooking school and for many the researcher met them at what was their first cooking class ever. Some students expressed a heightened interest in attending cookery school for the future: "I've never attended a cooking school until now. But now I would definitely take some just for the fun of learning and meeting new people". Overall the main impression given was of cooking school as part of the broad holiday experience. Indeed, one young woman had no idea she would be attending cooking school, having booked a study-tour that offered an introduction to Thai culture in general, though with plenty of beach time.

Turning now to the sub-group of eleven, the participants at two classes at a particular cooking school, the simplest available statement is that the results were broadly similar to the larger group, though, of course, there were differences. The most notable difference was that although on learning the majority of participants strongly or somewhat agreed with all prompts, the leader in rank order was to learn new cooking skills (a mean of 3.73), as opposed to learning about another culture through food. Strong demographic factors appear to have been afoot here. Five (45.5%) of those strongly agreeing attendance to gain cooking skills were aged 55 plus. Four (36.4%) of those strongly agreeing attendance to gain cooking skills were Chilean.

The other major difference was around sociability, where the smaller group elevated enriching relationships with existing friends and family as most important (a mean of 3.82). In the area of personal development elevating and confirming the ability to enjoy the company of those of other cultures was the front-runner with a mean of 3.82. In terms of demographics gender did not show significant difference in agreeing the statements, as per the larger group, though again women were somewhat less positive about elevating or confirming the ability to find personal space among others.

So far this methodological discussion has focused on the highly structured individual interviewing of students. However, there was also very open-ended discussion with groups, with individuals and pairs of attendees and all discussion with school owner/managers must also be remembered. All were both conversational and observational sources, sources which pointed away from a consideration of gaining cooking skills as primary in student attendance motivations and toward the cultural and sociable. In fact, the researcher often felt that all that had to be done was mention the word "culture" and conversation may divert in any direction, be that discussion of Thai culture or home cultures, including comparisons of home cultures with absolutely no reference to Thai culture, let alone specifically to it. Equally, there could be discussion that integrated all of food, cooking, Thai culture and home cultures. The researcher was pursued for information about Thai culture and the researcher's British culture, and there could be specific food references. The students were spellbound when the story of the egg custard tart's arrival into Ayutthaya from Portugal was explained. It is not simply a culinary story, but an important one in social history, about the changing ways of aristocracy. Few Thais would even be aware of the story. The researcher, in turn, learned a lot about Argentinian cattle-rearing. On another occasion a young woman took the researcher aside as she wanted a long chat and advice about various cultural matters, in fact relating to European culture. Maybe the overall key was that experiences were being had and shared, a point that will be returned to.

As previously indicated, for one school, whilst all its data was included in the general data pool, data was also held separately. For that school, the researcher ultimately proceeded to text-mine the school's TripAdvisor reviews. The aim was to cross-check the data already held and the text-mined data. A secondary concern was to assess data-mining as a tool in small-scale research, specifically a tool to inferentially discover client motivations from looking at reviews, endemic on the internet, but perhaps particularly true in travel, tourism and hospitality, arguably service industry in general. The school's twenty-seven reviews were entered in and considered through Python. Words inconsequential to the analysis were excluded from consideration as "stop words". Stop words are often in fact "small words" and labelled as such. The latter are the ands, ifs, buts of everyday language, namely often prepositions, conjunctions and pronouns. The researcher, though, also excluded a number of proper nouns, namely, people's names, from consideration. The aim was to consider the achieved keyword listing and, more particularly, the Wordcloud created, against the original data for the school and vice versa. Wordcloud indicates the relative number of uses of a word against others in the Wordcloud, so text-set, through character size.

Text mining has advantages and disadvantages quite aside from cheapness. Preuss (2017) points to the fact that mined text pre-exists aside from the research, thereby reflects reality much more closely than a researcher-designed questionnaire, or script for that matter. The questionnaire or script straightjackets the respondent or participant. They might not even really know or understand how to respond to the question, let alone respond in a way whereby they are true to themselves and their real views. That the text-mined data has not been produced with the current research in mind may, looking at the matter oppositely, produce a misalignment, however partially, between data and research question. In the case of the current research all the TripAdvisor reviews were positive. Writers were stressing characteristics of the school that appealed to them. In a sense inferring their motivations for attending a cooking school, or the particular cooking school, was a jump from their commentary. It assumed that writers wrote about things that motivated them, arguably though a reasonable assumption.

Discussion with clients at another cooking school revealed just how much scanning reviews is a determinant of final purchase. The method mentioned was first to consider school location against the students' accommodation and movements, then it appeared to be all down to the rank order of reviews of schools within a radius deemed appropriate. Discussion with management at yet another school revealed that management felt the same, the Tripadvisor reviews the-be-all-to-end-all. Everybody wants to be number one on Tripadvisor for that reason. Background to be noted here is comScore's ("Online Consumer-Generated Reviews") determination of the percentage of review users identifying reviews as having a significant influence on their purchase that is 87% for hotels, 84% for travel and 79% for restaurants. Having read the tourist cooking school reviews, students are motivated to attend particular schools, maybe schools in general. It follows that readers who attend the school are, arguably, motivated similarly to the writers, the text-mining approach, thereby, being revelatory not simply about past clients, but future ones too. For particular schools it could even be that mention of specific people would build something of a personal narrative. The researcher took the word stop off the names previously excluded. Sure enough, the name Kim appeared eight times in twenty-two full-text reviews. A reason to attend the school, given reading of the reviews, may well be to meet/interact with/be taught by Kim. Likewise may happen in respect of teachers and purchasing at other schools. Reading of teachers like Kim, or Kim herself, may act as a motivation to attend the generality of tourist cooking schools. Returning to the text-mining of the TripAdvisor reviews with proper names excluded, below shows the Wordcloud produced (Figure 1).

The text-mining and associated Wordcloud are both highly revealing, sometimes for omissions, not least lack of negative commentary. The word "market" jumps out from the Wordcloud, appeared often in reviews, and positively. Clearly the inclusion of a market trip was regarded as very important to the cooking school experience. Arguably, not only were reviewers motivated toward markets, with their cultural learning experience, but review readers might be or become so. Another well-featured word was "fun", which featured ahead of "learning". Writers were more orientated toward fun than toward learning. In fact, ahead of learning came the word "experience". Then, there were the words that did not appear at all, such as "educational", "skill" or "skills" that might have been focused in gaining cooking skills. Instead, that word "experience" simply came allied with rather generic words such as "great" and "amazing". Overall, the text-mined data seemed to cross-reference well with other data, appearing to be orientated toward the cultural, fun and sociable, not toward skills and learning. Finally, the survey moved to intensive interviews of five cooking school owners and managers. The question put to all participants was the very open-ended "Why do you think tourists come to cooking school courses in Thai cookery when they are holidaying in Thailand?" In essence all participants answered that primarily the reasons were cultural, but some agreed that the "cultural" epithet might be over-educated, too "fancy". Truthfully, it depends on what you see as the relationship between food and the broader culture.

There was certainly no doubt among owner/managers as to the primacy of love of Thai food in motivations of students. They attend because: “it’s popular”, “they love Thai food”, “they like Thai food”, “Thai food is considered a reason to come to Thailand. It’s one of the highlights of Thailand”, “They come firstly because they love Thai food”, “I think 90% of them, they want to join cooking class as experience about Thai food and Thai culture”. It is with the last comment that confusion seemingly sets in, but in fact the owner/managers unprompted very readily developed their arguments to embrace differing client demographics.

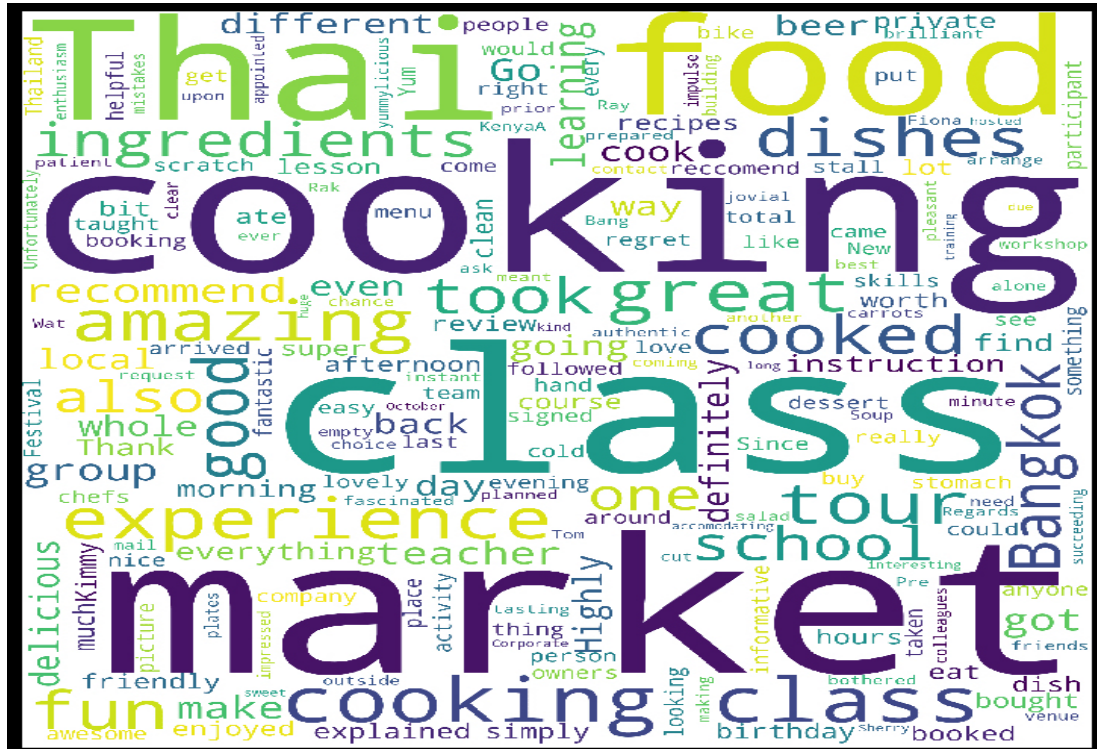


Figure 1. Wordcloud from text-mining of TripAdvisor Reviews of a Thai tourist cooking school's classes

One even apologised for having been too simplistic. Dividing clients in their own mind appeared to be something that owner/managers do as a starting point to understanding their clients and how to market to them. Approaches were varied, but all started by distinguishing between serious and less serious clients. It was for instance suggested that serious clients were defined by the fact that they cook at home, including Thai food. Indeed, one school owner said that the first question he asks clients is whether they cook at home. It was suggested: “Some of European or American people they cook Pad Thai a lot for the first time at home. Even though they’ve not tried a cooking class in Thailand”. It follows that when these people travel to Thailand, anyway searching out new experiences, they are very likely to want to take a cooking class. Their motivations to cook at home include that eating out at a Thai restaurant can be expensive, for instance in Australia. At home they will want to talk about what they learned and show their families and friends. While on a cooking course, they will be particularly interested in the market tour, having correct and high-quality ingredients pointed out to them and substitutes suggested to them to buy in their home country, when at home they may follow-up by e-mail with further questions. Another owner labelled the market tour “a key factor”. He though admitted much variability of response. Again, that was seen as deriving from whether or not the customer was likely to cook at home or not. Of course, the average client may be less involved than the home chefs. One owner/manager typified the mainstream client as feeling that on holiday they should test Thai food. He saw these clients as then choosing between cooking classes and food tours. To the extent that a cooking class was chosen, it was a “box ticked”, the food tourism trend conformed to, though in the background is likely to have been some thought that Thai food is part of Thai culture.

It was considered particularly likely that Malaysian, Singaporean and Philippine clients would choose the cooking class, as, say, dashing around on a street-food tour of Bangkok makes little sense when similar is so readily available in your home country. To be noted is that often clients have never cooked at all, never mind regularly cooking at home or wishing to do anything other than just an activity now, for fun, using the knowledge gained unlikely. It was suggested though that some of those who had never cooked, had no intention of using the learning at home, nevertheless had some sense of buy-in to Thai culture through taking the course, if only because food is part of culture, further interests in Thai culture not expressed. Additionally, it was felt that these lukewarm students often gained a huge sense of achievement in that Thai cuisine is very

easy to prepare successfully to a tasty outcome, including with no previous cooking experience. Positive outcomes are perfectly possible with relatively unmotivated students. It was suggested that often students simply attend cooking classes because a travel agent tells them that they should or because it is a period of rainy weather. “People don’t always book for the right reasons”, concluded one owner. Finally, another owner, who also owns an art retreat, spoke of husbands attending cooking school while wives were busily attending to their art. What was fascinating here is that these cooking school attendees were seen as very attentive students, particularly wanting to know about and understand ingredients and their place in the Thai view of cooking. Naturally, they enjoy the market tours hugely, yet attending cooking school at all could be seen as essentially motivated by their wives’ attendance at the art retreat. Clearly, pragmatic attendances do not necessarily mean uninterested students.

5. Discussions

Maybe what all students could easily agree on in their cooking school researches and attendances is that they were seeking and getting an experience. They were knowingly and visibly engaging in that adventure playground that is life and thereby asserting who they are. However, that is not just asserting, but perhaps above all making it available for others to see and to hear about, particularly, for instance, through Instagram, Twitter, Facebook or regional social media variants such as WeChat, Sina Weibo, QQ and Line. This is the age of the selfie. Huge amounts of money are spent making venues selfie-worthy (Elliott, 2018). It could be that a leading reason for attending a cooking school is to get a selfie with Chef Kim, mentioned above, or with Chef Ya in Krabi. The Culinary Institute of America now teaches the art of preparing food for the selfie (Stebiner, 2017). Pine and Gilmore (1999) offer the idea of an experience economy. Touristic cooking schools are an excellent fit with some areas of an experience offering. The aim is to create an experience through a memorable event. In this context Pine and Gilmore (1999) suggest that “work is theatre and every business a stage”. Companies are in the business of scripting and staging for an experience.

In truth, Benihana, the chain restaurant, seems considerably better than the cooking schools in scripting and marketing an experience, including when the experience is a cooking lesson. “Get behind the hibachi grill and try your hand at being a Benihana chef with our Be The Chef packages” their website screams (“Be The Chef”). Each package includes a one-to-one training session from a master chef. “Then, impress your friends and family with your newfound skills at a special performance they’ll be talking about long after the meal has ended!” Included are Splash ‘N Meadow entrées and vegetable fried rice for guest chef and guests, Benihana hat, Benihana apron, Benihana Teppanyaki Chef Certificate and commemorative photo. This is marketing an experience, not food, not even a meal. The Benihana example shows two aspects of working the experience economy that Pine and Gilmore (1999) see as critical. Firstly, Pine and Gilmore (1999) suggest that “customers play a key role in creating the performance or event that creates the experience”. Beyond this major importance lies in the event and experience being immersive, that is involving full sensory involvement, meaning mobilisation of all senses in an event perhaps particularly involving sight, sounds and smells. Cooking schools tick all those boxes, along also with taste and touch. Cooking schools also tick the box for customer involvement. Indeed cooking school students co-create the event. Cooking schools clearly provide a saleable experience. Within that cooking and learning cooking skills are elements, but by no means sole contributors or necessarily the most memorable or valued contributors.

6. Conclusions, limitations and recommendations

The preponderance of evidence from this study is it directly from students, from school owner/managers, from text-mined school reviews or from observation indicates that attendance at the touristic cooking schools covered was more concerned with cultural learning and less concerned with learning cooking skills. That may be taken as learning about Thai culture or at least cooking as a specific within Thai culture. However, students were also interested in multi-cultural learning, a reference to cultural insights they could get from other students about their countries and cultures. The cooking schools were relatively unaware of this and must develop it as a potent marketing proposition. Sociability was also highly important, particularly where considered in terms of gaining that experience with those of other cultures. Cooking schools might do more to encourage conversation between students, meaning conversation about anything, but to include about home cultures. The researcher certainly felt that any marketing professional mentioning culture, culture and culture again understood the selling point, and anybody mentioning “our finest Sabatier knives, Magimix mixers and storage in our fine Smeg refrigerators” would be missing it. The relevant mixing is with Chef Kim and other students.

On the secondary point of value of text-mining online reviews, the researcher felt value was shown, the exercise worthwhile. Martin’s (2016) conclusion over text-mining was that it might help, but would be sensibly used as one among a number of data-gathering techniques. The researcher felt that the throwing up of an over-arching explanation, experience, through text-mining was particularly fortunate. Understanding was furthered significantly. Whether such would always be true is open to discussion, and, above all further testing in the field of travel/tourism/hospitality that is so rich in review

material. The researcher would suggest that an approach as per Creswell's (2009) sequential explanatory model is appropriate. Beyond text-mining it would be good for the future for this research on student cooking school attendance motivations to be conducted elsewhere, in other countries, where tourist cooking schools are the significant presence that they are in Thailand. Equally it would be valuable to research where they are less ubiquitous, to discover why? Likewise, further research could be conducted in Thailand reaching other resort areas. The researcher took a calculated risk in mostly undertaking this research in green or low season. The feeling was that school managers might have more time and patience to deal with peripheral requests. What was not expected was that agreements would be made, but no students would book for many, many days hence. Also, one school owner whose school the researcher was considering suddenly decided to simply close for a few months, as he just was not getting customers. Monsoon season in Thailand is getting worse year on year. It was a definite limiting factor. Future researchers on this topic in Thailand might look to high season to find a greater availability of students to interview. Finally, a further limitation of this study, aside from those mentioned, is that it was very demographically deterministic. It focused on run-of-the-mill tourist cooking schools with relatively downscale pricing. If higher-priced schools were visited, with better facilities, some indeed quite sumptuous, it would be instructive to know the motivations, interests and feelings of what would, presumably, be a very different client demographic.

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