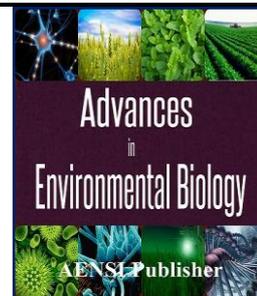




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Preserving Authenticity of The Malay Traditional Food In Hotel Industry: Is It Possible With Modern Cooking Technology?

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ABSTRACT

This research attempts to identify and recognize the influence of modern technology in keeping the authenticity of Malay food prepared by the Malay chefs in hotels of Klang Valley, Malaysia. The usage of modern and advanced appliances in the preparation of authentic traditional Malay food in hotel industry has been intensely debated among professionals. This study adopted an in-depth interview with 10 Malay chefs working in the 3-star, 4-star and 5-star hotels in Klang Valley, Malaysia. An observation method is also employed in order to understand the impact of modern equipment in keeping the authenticity of traditional food. Results of this research informs that modern equipment has great advantages, especially when it is used in preparing large amount of food. It is also important to reduce labor cost, ease the food preparation, time saving, standardization in food management and many others. In conclusion, modern and technological equipment with systematic authenticity guidelines in hotels provided great advantages in the traditional food preparation without depriving their originality.

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INTRODUCTION

The hotel industry can be described as an exciting and challenging experience, especially in the hotel's food and beverage department of a top-tier tourism city. At the same time, culinary professionals have the opportunity to interact with chefs from different ethnic backgrounds, diverse training and skills and management experiences [1]. However, the nature of work in the hotel industry is always known for poor compensations, long working hours, low job security, and limited advancement [2]. Robinson et al., [6] stated that hotels seem to be characterized by the presence of more ambitious chefs, whose protectionism of their skill sets can cause inter-organizational conflict. Robinson et al., [6] pointed out that the chefs would have to survive in both physically and psychologically straining work environments. Understanding the working and changing environment of the hotel industry is the key to success for chefs to further enhance their career as outstanding chefs. However, the key problems with this explanation are that the majority of the Malay chefs in the hotel industry in Malaysia had to treasure for alternatives in preparing the traditional food in a large amount and speediest way in order to accommodate the hotels' customer. Therefore this study will investigate the impact of modern technology to the Malay hotel chef's practices in sustaining the originality of the traditional Malay food prepared in the commercial industry.

2.0 Literature Review:

The literature on Malay food has emphasized the importance of traditional cooking equipment and tools that will make preparing the Malay food much easier. As Tan (2004) described, in the past, a typical Malay kitchen must have a sturdy *lesung batu* (mortar and pestle) and a *batu giling* (stone rollers meant for smoothening out seeds). The Malay kitchen would usually have the smell of firewood and the daily haze of burning charcoal mingled with the aroma of pungent *belachan*, red chilli, and garlic being fused together in

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massive heated woks already blackened with used. Leftover food was kept in wood cabinets with wire-mesh doors. Chillies and small shrimps were dried in the sun on rattan sieves called *nyiru*. The kitchen served as a place where all family members, especially the mother and daughters gathered to have chit chats, grind spices, stir pots and observe cooking methods. The women would work through the night steadily blending fragrant spices against the coolness of the gray-black *Lesung batu*, squeezing handfuls of coconut for milk, while carefully listening to the gentle rise and fall of the sizzle and hiss from giant cooking vats that billow steam through the night air [8].

The use of traditional tools, such as the stone mortar and pestle are believed to release the food's unique taste compared to the use of modern equipment, such as the blender and food processor. The blender for example, is said to only grind the ingredients, unlike the traditional stone mortar which pounds the ingredients uniformly. In Malaysia, many people still prefer to use the stone mortar and pestle to pound the wet and fresh ingredients like onion, garlic, ginger, and chillies because the ingredients would be more delicious when mixed together. However, to others who conform to modernization, pounding ingredients using the stone mortar and pestle are considered trivial and requires more preparation time. It all depends on how the individual perceives the authentic Malay traditional dishes [12].

However, the image of modern lifestyles and the introduction to quick and easy methods of cooking have impacted the Malay cuisine [10]. For example, the Malay community then used banana leaves to cover grilled fish on top of the embers of a wood fire so that the aroma and flavor from the banana leaves would incorporate into the grilled fish. Not many people know that the secret of cooking comes from the traditional equipment itself. However, with the introduction of modern techniques nowadays, they tend to replace it with aluminum foil and roast it in the oven as an alternative to the traditional way. Of course the results of the two techniques are different in terms of taste. However, these new techniques help the majority of Malay chefs in preparing the traditional Malay food in hotels. In addition, the end products definitely would be different in terms of taste, flavor, and color, but the Malay chefs have to adopt them in their routines due to the large capacity of food to be prepared in the hotels.

A study by Zahari *et al.*, [12] explained that technology advances, mainly in the kitchen, have brought a new dimension to the food industries. The utilization of modern equipment is identified as the catalyst for better preparation and cooking to meet the demand and supply in the hotel industry. The application of this modern technology also helps the Malay chefs in converting traditional to modern cooking methods, which facilitate their cooking, as well as speed up the cooking time. Truninger [10] believed that technology may open up different repertoires of know-how and skills, without which, users may struggle to work appropriately or conduct their everyday lives without disruptions and social (dis) coordination (p. 38). In addition, Li *et al.*, [4] justified that by using the modern knowledge and technology in improving the traditional food in China, it is beneficial to preserve their precious culture for the future generation [9]. The technology could also improve the standard of living for the people of China, besides increasing the value of their agricultural products and economy [11].

3.0 Methodology:

A groups of professional Malay chefs were selected for this study in order to provide an understanding about the impact of cooking the traditional Malay food using modern technology at the hotel in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Qualitative method was applied as this methods were effective compared to survey question for the generalization of the results. The first step in this process was to interviews with 10 Malay chefs who were willing to participate in this study. The group is considered as a senior cook that are more "traditional community" due to their background and working experiences in the industry. The purposive sampling were chosen in recruiting the 3-star to 5-star hotels Malay chefs followed by snowball sampling in order to get more participants to get involved.

This sampling was generalized and included only the people who were reachable through the local contacts and willing to be interviewed. Since this was a self-selected group that interested to shared their experienced in preparing the traditional Malay food, it can be said that the sampling was biased in favor of the Malay chefs population in the hotel in Malaysia. Before that, the participated Malay chefs was contacted through telephone with a brief explanation about the purpose and objectives of the study. Then, the appointment was made according to the Malay chef's time and availability and also their preferred location for the interview to be done.

The interview was done by the researcher using the face to face interviews. One interview session lasted from 45 minutes to one and a half hours. Semi structured questions was used to allow the interviewer to probe for details, to talk about their experiences in cooking and working in the hotel. Each of the Malay chefs had to sign the consent form approved by the Head of researcher. All the interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia and were audiotape recorded. Shortly, verbatim transcripts were completed from the tapes and reviewed for accuracy. However, Bahasa Malaysia were translated into English for the data analysis and verified by English editor to make sure that the meanings remains as original as it is.

The interview transcripts were analyzed manually using the content analysis. After the themes were derived from the interview transcripts, peer check were used to discussed about the emergent themes and validates research findings. Member check was used in this study to facilitate the patterns emerging from interviews to discuss about the emerging patterns.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings from this study indicates that the cultural practice in traditional Malay cooking such as using clay pots and firewood charcoal is slowly dying due to the introduction of new gadgets and advanced appliances in the hotels. The efficiency of the new modern equipment gives chefs more freedom to concentrate on their cooking and makes it easier for them to prepare large quantities of food in a shorter time. Results from observation method in the Malay kitchen provides an evident of the heavy usage of modern equipment and technology in preparing and cooking the Malay food. This understanding reveals when the respondents were asked to describe existing equipment provided in the Malay kitchen. The majority of them were referring to advanced technological appliances.

Modernization had changed the types of facilities equipped in the Malay kitchen in hotel industries. The senior Malay chefs indicated that during their period of time, they have only very basic equipment to be used in the kitchen. As explained before, the experience they had been only from the informal education passed down by the mothers and families in the kitchen at home. These experiences were used as guidelines to work in hotels which had not been equipped with modern gadgets. Lack of knowledge on how to use the equipment has been identified as the reason why hotels provided only the basic tools and machines for them to use. The senior Malay chefs confirmed in the preliminary interviews that the facilities in the Malay kitchens were not as advanced as the western, Chinese and other kitchens. The present study also demonstrated that the effect of modernization did produce a better opportunity for the current Malay chefs to fully utilize the modern equipment in preparing Malay food.

The majority of the Malay chefs commented that technology has helped to increase significant level of productivity. The modern equipment in the Malay kitchen such as *tilting braising pan* has been used widely to cook dishes in large quantities. The observation in Malay kitchen have shown that some of the Malay chefs preferred to use tilting pan for cooking dishes namely *beef rendang*, *biryani rice* and so on. Some Malay chefs even elaborated on the advantages of the modern equipment. Malay chef explained,

"I could not agree more with the advanced technology that we have in the kitchen nowadays. It saves a lot of our time and efforts in preparing food as Malay food uses a lot of ingredients and requires a tedious preparation. It also saves on manpower cost in the kitchen as we always have a problem with high turnover staff." (Chef 1, 27 years of experience, 3-star)

Another Malay chef commented,

"Technology has made cooking and planning very efficient. Compared to 20 to 30 years ago, the technology that we have now has brought about a tremendous change to our food production. It's just about how we make use of the technology to suit to cooking traditional food today." (Chef 10, 12 years of experience, 3-star)

In another turn however, one chef is convinced that technology does not turn a dreadful cook into a notable chef. He said,

"Great equipment cannot turn a poor chef into a great chef. It has to do with a person's determination and passion in cooking. You cannot apply the technology if you do not know how to cook basic traditional food." (Chef 4, 37 years of experience, 4-star)

In addition, Malay chef 10 pondered that technology could limit the ability of the employees in practicing the cultural knowledge and values in cooking. He stressed,

"Cooking traditional Malay food with modern equipment is enjoyable but you still need to use the original recipe as well as the cooking method. The values of preparing and cooking the traditional food lie in the hands-on experience and not on the advanced technology." (Chef 3, 26 years of experience, 5-star)

While it may well be valid that modern equipment gives so many benefits to the chefs in commercial kitchens, this study argues about the values that should remain woven in the Malay chefs' everyday practices in the kitchen. Their practices should capture the elements of our Malay culture and tradition in every dish created. However, some of the Malay chefs talked about the challenges of using the modern kitchen appliances in getting the original taste of traditional food. This problem was discussed with another Malay chef who noted that the modern equipment cannot compete with the taste and aroma that the traditional equipment provides.

Conclusion:

In this investigation, the aim was to assess the usage of modern equipment and tools by the Malay chefs in preparing the traditional Malay food at the hotel in Klang Valley, Malaysia. This study has identified that majority of the Malay chefs appreciated the advanced technology applied in modern equipment to fasten their

job in food preparations and cooking. The research has also shown that technology helped a majority of the Malay chefs in their work planning and saved on labour cost. Although this study focuses on the benefits of using the modern technology to do the cooking for the Malay chefs, the findings may well have a bearing on the disadvantages of this advanced appliances. Some of the Malay chefs agreed that technology depreciated the values of traditional Malay food in terms of preparations and cooking methods. In addition, some of them also acknowledged that technology could harm the traditional Malay food whereby people tried to modify the method of preparations and cooking of certain dishes. However, when taken together, these two findings suggest that the knowledge and skills of the Malay chefs are the most important things than the technology that they used in food preparations because it is correspondingly contributes to the preservation of the traditional Malay food especially when they trail the truthful ingredients, techniques and cooking methods in preparing the Malay food.

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