The Man behind the Wok: The Hotels’ Malay Chefs Work Recipes

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the knowledge about traditional Malay food recipes among the Malay chefs in the 3-star to 5-star hotels in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Malay chefs with more than 10 years of experiences working in the hotels were selected as informant in this study. Qualitative approached using the non-participant observation in the Malay hotels’ kitchen and in-depth interview are employed to understand the phenomena. The results from these two techniques found that majority of the Malay chefs were not having a written manuscript or recipes book in the kitchen or neither in their office. Almost all of the recipes were coming from the generation practices besides of their experiences in the kitchen and some of the recipes are from the experiments in the kitchen. The hard worked in the kitchen as a helper, received instruction and task from mother and mentor are the modes of transmission of the recipes knowledge among the Malay chefs. However, mothers play a significant role in influencing the Malay chefs to uphold the family recipes and generation practices.

KEY WORDS: Malay chef, traditional Malay food, bonding, cooking, cultural food, hotel

INTRODUCTION

Malay food is a collection of most interesting and complex flavors with blend cultures of Malay, Chinese, Indian and Eurasian. The food itself is known for eclectic influences from Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei. Besides of the rich tastes in herbs and spices, Malay food brought in difference flavors to create a distinct and vibrant cuisine that anyone cannot resist a chance to taste it. Central to the entire discipline of Malay food is the concept of using recipes in cooking.

Literature Review:

As a matter of fact, Malay people always share their common meaning through foods; for example the transmission of tradition and recipes from grandmother to their daughters and granddaughters. According to Henderson (2004, pg. 237), “recipes and relationships are called upon to investigate memories of the past and predicaments of the present.” These recipes normally shared through their memory and they do not have all those recipes described and prescribed on a written text. Similarly, Ballantyne and Benny (2009) found that normally recipes has used primarily as memoirs of lived experience, or as reflections of day to day domestic cookery, food choices and eating habits which are tied up with identity and subjectivity. Normally the preparation and cooking of food is an integral process for the transmission of family values and culture over time.
As Zahara (2012) points out, family recipes are usually passed on, preserved and modified across generations which are the reflections of the family activities in the home kitchen. What is more, cooking together and sharing a meal always been key activities that bonded families through thick and thin. Collectively, these study outline a critical role for a family legacy in heritage food that will continue to connect from generation to generation, making it relevant and an inspiration not just for the present generation but for future generations to come (Zahara, 2012).

Considering all of this evidence, it seems that this study offers some important insights into the relationship between cooking and recipes of the traditional Malay food by the Malay chefs in the commercial hotels kitchen. Malay chefs believed that by drawing their passion in this professional job, they manage to come out with the creativity in the kitchen to create a great food and great recipes. Every day is a learning process and to them those experiments with new ingredients, techniques and equipment are their learning tools to create a great food. As one of the Malay chefs described, they like to meet a new people because they are open for a new ideas, knowledge and information about the Malay food. Sometimes they could get new techniques to work with their food in the kitchen. To them, there is always something to learn and to create in the kitchen. As Kamozawa and Talbot (2010) said, the knowledge that they obtained have allowed them to improve the flavor, efficiency, and functionality in the kitchen to be a better cook. This view is supported by De Backer (2003) who writes that recipes are not only the lists of ingredients and directions that people always use in their cooking but they are embedded in a process of giving and social exchange of knowledge.

**Methodology:**

This is an exploratory study to evaluate the used of recipes in cooking by the Malay chef in preparing the traditional Malay food at the 3-star to 5-star hotels in Klang Valley, Malaysia. The secret about recipes normally being used by the respondents in the kitchen were investigated as well as their understanding on the origins of the recipes that the Malay chefs expressed the belief that sharing recipes was not a common practice during their period of time as they are actively engage in the day operation in the kitchen and it is become as the subject of an observation and in-depth interview. The entire semi-structured interview was tape recorded and transcribed verbatim manually. The transcription was translated from Malay language which most of the Malay chefs are fluent and then further translated into English. Analytic insights and interpretations were derived and thematic characteristics have been identified at the end of the study.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The most surprising aspect of the data is in the first question that discussed on recipes, “Where do the origins of the recipes that the Malay chefs use in the kitchen originate from?” Besides not having standard recipes, most of the Malay chefs agreed that they used the recipes that had been passed down from their family, mentors and so on. Interestingly, the observation in the Malay kitchens found that it was very difficult to see any written or manuscript of recipes. Therefore, it can be concluded that the original recipes has the potential of becoming lost forever if the knowledge has not passed on to the rest of the Malay chef’s community in the hotel’s kitchen.

Secondly, another most striking observation to emerge from the data comparison was not many of the Malay chefs were willing to share their secret recipes with the researcher. When the subject was asked, a majority commented that family recipes normally became the source many of their signature dishes. Some of the Malay chefs expressed the belief that sharing recipes was not a common practice during their period of time in the Malay kitchen. This suggests that learning the cooking traditions depends on individuals and how many...
recipes were written in black and white. Nevertheless, almost two-thirds of the Malay chefs said that never learned to cook from books because there were recipes that did not work. Some of the chefs did emphasize on Muslim practices in sharing knowledge. The more knowledge you share, the more you will benefit in return. They were willing to share their old cooking traditions because they were afraid that the knowledge will be lost if not written on paper.

In response to the questions about recipes, all of them admitted to using family recipes in their cooking. As most of them had basic cooking skills during their childhood, they practiced these recipes in preparing traditional Malay food in hotels. They also agreed that their mentors’ recipes had influenced their cooking. Malay chefs were asked about having standard recipes in cooking traditional Malay food and the challenges to document the recipes in the hotel. The feedback from one of the Malay chef was, "It is very difficult to standardize the Malay recipes. For example, I once gave a complete recipe to my staffs but the outcome was different in taste, texture, colour and flavour." (Chef 10, 12 years of experience, 3-star)

Yet, another Malay chef emphasized on individual skills and knowledge. He noted:
"For me it all depends on individual skills and knowledge. The person has to know the basic knowledge which is the taste, colour and flavour of the ingredients that he wants to cook. He has to master these elements first." (Chef 7, 34 years of experience, 4-star)

Another Malay chef prefers to appreciate the recipes from family traditions. He said:
"We need to refer to the recipes handed down to us. If the chicken curry recipe has five ingredients, then all five must be present along with additional ingredients." (Chef 6, 22 years of experience, 5-star)

Another Malay chef remembered his family’s traditions in preparing Malay food. He stated that":
"My grandmother measured using words like ‘secubit’ (a pinch), ‘secetak’ (a handful) and ‘secawan’ (a cup). I would convert them into grams, litres and so on but the result would be different. I tried before when making the ‘roti canai’. The result was awful." (Chef 9, 14 years of experience, 5-star)

One of the Malay chefs expressed his worry on the future generation of Malay chefs in the hotel. Only the ambitious ones who fully mastered the Malay food could survive in the industry. He said, "The problem with some of the young Malay chefs at the hotel is talent. Although they followed the original recipe, the outcome definitely was different. I wonder why they don’t have the touch in cooking Malay food." (Chef 14, 37 years of experience, 4-star)

Another chef explained:
"The reason why we don’t have a standard recipe is because we will use only best recipe to serve the customers. We will try among us the improved recipes and serve the best." (Chef 15, 35 years of experience, 4-star)

Conclusion:
This study has found that generally the practices of the Malay chefs in the hotels’ kitchens were still not fully documented. In reality, the knowledge that Malay chefs’ acquired in terms of recipes, cooking techniques and skills was inherited verbally from generation to generation. One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that Malay food has no standard measurement of ingredients. A majority of Malay chef’s measure using estimations based on their experience and knowledge in cooking. It is difficult to have the original recipes in a standard document as most of them were passed down from others through informal conversations in the kitchen such as between mother, son and daughter. In addition, variation of recipes emerges from an individual’s creation of the dishes. This is closely related to the knowledge, experience and skills that they have in cooking traditional food. As a matter of fact, majority of the Malay chefs also have agreed that their standard recipes resulted from the experiments conducted in the Malay kitchen. Chefs normally did some research on the recipes and combined it with their knowledge and experience in traditional food and it came from many sources such as books, newspapers, internet and blogs to generate new ideas for their recipes’ creation. The investigation of recipes also has shown that the customers’ requests and demands are one of the factors why Malay chefs come up with new Malay food recipes. The fusion element in the ingredients is the new marketing strategy for most hotels in presenting a modern touch to Malay food. The idea to share signature recipes among chefs is not a normal practice in the kitchen. Some of them kept to themselves their secret recipes. As a result, the process of documentation the recipes was often neglected by the Malay chefs in the hotels.
REFERENCES


