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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Thai Street Food in America: Pop-Up Culture, Nostalgia, and Commercial Potential

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| ABSTRACT

Thai street food has emerged as a dynamic force in America's contemporary culinary landscape, particularly within the proliferating pop-up dining scene. This study investigates the interplay between pop-up culture, expressions of nostalgia among Thai immigrant communities, and the commercial potential of Thai street food establishments in the United States. The research is grounded in an extensive review and synthesis of secondary sources, including culinary industry reports, academic analyses of diaspora foodways, media coverage of pop-up events, and market data on ethnic food trends. By systematically analyzing these materials, the study explores how the flexibility and transience of pop-up formats enable Thai entrepreneurs and chefs to introduce authentic street food experiences to diverse urban audiences, circumventing many of the startup barriers of permanent restaurants. The findings suggest that the pop-up model not only adapts well to the informal, interactive character of Thai street cuisine but also functions as an expressive platform for nostalgia—allowing immigrants and second-generation Thais to recreate and share culinary memories from their homeland. Additionally, the investigation identifies significant commercial opportunities: the growing curiosity among American consumers about regional Thai flavors, the lower investment risks associated with temporary venues, and the use of pop-ups as incubators for future brick-and-mortar businesses. Overall, the study concludes that Thai street food pop-ups foster cultural connection and entrepreneurial agility in the U.S., highlighting their dual role as vehicles of heritage expression and scalable small business innovation, thus offering critical insights for scholars and practitioners interested in globalized food culture and immigrant enterprise.

| KEYWORDS

Thai street food, Pop-up culture, Market data, Commercial opportunities, American consumers

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### 1. Introduction

No traveler ever forgets the presence of sizzling woks and the smells of stir-fried garlic, chili, lemongrass, and coconut milk on the busy Bangkok, Chiang Mai, or Phuket streets. Thai street food is not necessary but rather an institution, a culture, a history, an identity, and an innovator. Now, thousands of miles across the ocean, the Thai street food scene is currently undergoing an impressive revival in the United States, as it has turned out to be one of the most popular and financially successful parts of the ethnic food market to date (Kapoor, 2016).

What was once a niche in some trendier urban neighborhoods or community-owned restaurants is everywhere now - on food trucks and pop-up stalls, at festivals, and even in fine dining fusion establishments. The emergence of Thai street food in America is aligned with several cultural and economic obsessions: the American palate getting

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more diverse, the entrepreneurialism of Thai immigrants and second-generation chefs, pop-up and mobile food culture, and nostalgia and a yearning for authenticity in a constantly globalizing food system.

This paper will discuss the development of Thai street food into a global phenomenon that started as a local tradition of the region, emphasizing how Thai street food has been used and developed in the U.S market. Through the study of the role of a pop-up culture, the emotional strength of food as a cultural memory, as well as the business opportunities (and barriers) of this trend, we can understand what happens when cuisine travels, as well as how it changes and adapts in the new environment.

## **2. The Roots of Thai Street Food: Culture on a Plate**

Thai street food is rooted in the past and in society. In Thailand, it is not a kind of snack but rather a key method of eating, socializing, and communicating with the community (Teerapong Teangsompong et al., 2024). Thai street food developed in the floating markets and street sellers, which were supposed to be a democratic and inclusive food system. All blue-collar workers, students, and tourists enjoy many meal options offered at affordable prices, and they are freshly made.

The most essential Thai dishes, such as pad kra pao (stir-fried basil pork), tom yum goong (spicy shrimp soup), and khao pad (fried rice), are all created with the same philosophy behind the Thai cuisine balance of flavors, freshest of ingredients, and cooking fast (The, 2022). Their ability to taste good and be eaten on the move makes Thai street food an exclusive appeal to its users.

The combination of these flavor profiles, namely spicy, sour, salty, sweet, and bitter, is not randomly matched but well-balanced in Thai cooking. Regionality is also a significant part. Northern food, such as khao soi (curry noodle soup), contrasts with Southern dishes such as gaeng tai pla (fermented fish curry) (Jeaheng et al., 2023). As a cosmopolitan center, Bangkok presents a very eclectic combination of cultures.

According to the facts, Thai food has emerged in America since the later decades of the 20th century when the region saw an influx of Southeast Asian Immigrants and Thai restaurants started in the bigger towns. It is, however, not until recently that the variations of street foods began penetrating mainstream minds; in the past decade, variations of street food, which are bold, aromatic, and at times informal dishes, have managed to infiltrate the mainstream.

## **3. From Bangkok to Brooklyn: The Rise of Thai Pop-Up Culture**

The pop-up movement is one of the most critical factors that made Thai street food successful in America. Unlike a typical restaurant, a pop-up kitchen can utilize a booth in the market, a commercial kitchen shared by several other chefs, or an overhauled garage to present their food without the expense of using a restaurant.

Pop-ups can also be experimented with, and feedback is given directly by the customer. The chefs are able to try out menu items, perfect their service, and gain a following without having to purchase permanent stores. To many Thai-American chefs, pop-ups are more than a business venture but a way of creative expression.

Consider the case of a San Francisco-based pop-up, Chiang Mai Nights, established by a Thai-American couple who were missing home (Kapoor, 2016). The weekend experiment later attracted hundreds of clients who wanted to taste such food as nam prik ong (Northern Thai chili-tomato dip) and kanom jeen (fermented rice noodles). Their story represents a bigger trend: many Thai pop-up ventures are driven by passion and homesickness, and this ability to connect with the audience, both Thai and non-Thai, makes them successful.

Instagram and TikTok are social media apps that have increased the pop-up culture. Beautiful and tasty Thai street food products are the most desirable dishes to share online. Instead, close-ups of grilled meat skewers, colored garnishes, and fire-filled woks are intriguing and encourage action. Word-of-mouth and digital marketing have enabled small-scale Thai food sellers to attract people without adverts.

This has also been raised through night markets. Asian night markets lure thousands every weekend in cities such as Los Angeles, New York, and Houston. These festivals allow Thai sellers to sell specialized foodstuffs--such as tod mun pla (fish cakes) or kanom krok (coconut rice pancakes) to gastro tourists (Teerapong Teangsompong et al., 2024). For young Thai-American entrepreneurs, these markets are more than a sales opportunity; they are a stage for cultural storytelling and culinary experimentation.

#### **4. Food as Nostalgia: Identity, Memory, and Meaning**

Despite its convenience and taste, Thai street food appeals to many people because it is a strong medium of nostalgia. Thai immigrants and their descendants choose to cook and eat street food to stay connected to their nation, customs, and culture.

Nostalgia is in the tiniest of things, like the smell of nam pla (fish sauce), the feel of rice noodles in my mouth, or the way I hear soup ladles scrape against the metal pots (Jeaheng et al., 2023). To most Thai-Americans, these recreations within pop-ups become a form of maintaining the culture. It is about memories of the grandparents' kitchens, the markets they visited as children, and vendors who made many impressions in their hometown.

This sentimentalism makes Thai street food appealing even outside of its culinary merit. Pop-up chefs usually have some stories, which they describe on social media, on menus, or during communication with customers. Such a narrative aspect makes the food human-like and results in intimacy that old restaurant-style dining does not always imply.

Other Thai food entrepreneurs also push stereotypes through their channels. For decades, Thai food in America was a limited offering of a handful of popular dishes, such as pad Thai, green curry, and spring rolls. The pop-up chefs already bring the region's items to the table, discuss what they mean in cultural terms, and encourage the patrons to think of Thai food as something multifaceted and varied. This way, they take back control of the production and consumption of their culture.

#### **5. Commercialization: From Pop-Ups to Profits**

Street Thai food in America has been a hit and profitable. The ethnic food business in the U.S. is flourishing, and Southeast Asian foods are booming. As market analysts estimate, the overall street food market will exceed \$1.5 billion in 2030, and the U.S. is among the leading emerging regions (Future Data Stats, 2024). Thai street food, based on its price, flavor variety, and Instagram potential, is an excellent product that could venture into this expanding market.

Food trucks, in particular, provide a niche in the middle of mobility and scalability to Thai entrepreneurs. Trucks such as Thai Me Up in Portland or Sticky Rice in Austin serve hundreds of people daily due to high foot traffic and location (Thai, 2004). The majority of them begin with one truck and progress to several trucks or even brick-and-mortar branches since they have developed a brand.

The other promising avenue is product development. All kinds of Thai chili pastes, curry kits, and pre-packaged sauces are currently being found in big grocery stores. Firms such as Omsom and Mae Ploy have brought Thai flavors to mainstream kitchens in America. When Thai chefs have good brand identities, passive income can flow through the sale of bottled sauces, spice mixes, and even frozen meals.

There is also an increased number of franchising and investment. Thailand Companies such as Thai restaurant chains in Dallas are trying regional and national expansion. Fast-casual Asian concepts are becoming more appealing to investors, assuming flavor, convenience, and authenticity, which Thai street food is all about.

Nevertheless, there are some problems with commercializing Thai street food. Complying with health standards, food consistency, the use of legit ingredients, and customer education are continuous challenges. Some

entrepreneurs also face the dilemma of neglecting authenticity to meet Americans' expectations, which tends to diminish the exactness that makes Thai street food desirable.

## **6. Innovation, Fusion, and Cultural Exchange**

Although it is crucial to patronize traditions, Thai street food in America is also a place of innovation. Thai-American cooks attempt to merge food craft, use new ingredients, and mix Thai flavors with worldwide cuisine.

Nowadays, dishes such as pad Thai burritos, green curry mac and cheese, and Thai tea doughnuts are represented in city food culture. These mixed products are attracted to younger consumers who are seeking something different but with a traditional taste. Fusion does not always imply inauthenticity, but a change in the identity of Thai food as it continues to evolve and change in diaspora.

Other popular Thai foods are also vegan and gluten-free. Entrepreneurs are experimenting with soy-based fish sauce substitutes, jackfruit as pork alternatives, or low-carb noodle-based dish preparations to fulfill diet trends. It enables Thai street food to be passed on to broader audiences and helps not to change its essence in terms of taste.

Technology also causes change. Thai food pop-ups and trucks can streamline activities using online ordering platforms, delivery apps, and digital POS systems. Others offer virtual cooking lessons or food stories on Zoom, transforming their food spots into lifestyle brands.

This has also captured the attention of cultural institutions. Universities and museums are already bringing Thai chefs to demonstrate their cooking, give talks on food history, or host parties to a shared dinner as part of multicultural programs. This raises the level of Thai street food above that of cheap eats to an art that is the subject of study and art.

## **7. The Role of Thai Women in Street Food Business**

In the Thai culture of street foods, women have contributed considerably, whether in Thailand or the United States. In Thailand, women lead the street market food business: They manage food markets and supply chains and maintain generations of cooking traditions. This is reflected in the Thai food pop-ups in the U.S. with many new projects, men-led by Thai and Thai-American females coming to the table not only with their recipes but also with their stories, survival, and business experience (Phakdeetham, 2024).

Thai pop-ups run by women have become popular not only for their food but also for the storytelling around them in cities such as Los Angeles, Seattle, and New York. Numerous women rely on their maternal inheritance, re-inventing the meals they were taught by their mothers and grandmothers, making them fit new audiences (Phakdeetham, 2024). By reclaiming cultural identity, these chefs also take ownership in the restaurant business that males dominate.

In addition, their leadership tends to represent the community values, such as the importance of planning together rather than competing with each other, and educating others in general rather than being exclusive. Thai women-owned pop-ups often have workshops, fundraising, or collaboration with other marginalized food enterprises. This means that their business is not a business: it is a cause to be supported, a liberation movement, and a culture-saving movement. By noting these narratives, it will provide more insight into the situation that it is not only about taste but also about the heritage and gender roles that Thai street food encompasses.

## **8. The Impact of Thai Street Food on Local American Communities**

Introducing Thai Street food to American neighborhoods is not only pleasure-advancing to the brain but also community-changing. Another benefit is that pop-ups and food trucks will likely mobilize unused public areas to stimulate pedestrian traffic and lead to an active social life. Night markets with Thai suppliers as the sellers unite people and help to create multicultural ties, and are more inclusive by experiencing the same things.

Thai food enterprises would help stir up micro-economics in economically less developed parts. They employ cooks, drivers, and marketing people, and they use local ingredients suppliers. The pop-up is also a place where young chefs and food developers can gain momentum before spending huge sums on the capacity to rent a restaurant establishment. Some local governments have even offered grants or shared kitchen facilities to assist small businesses since these can help economic and cultural growth.

Concisely, the effect of Thai street food is not limited to food delight. It is a way to form cities, create economic boosters, and establish cross-cultural connections. This societal pressure further contributes another dimension of significance to this discussion on why Thai street food in America is not only successful but critical.

## **9. Conclusion: A Movement Rooted in Flavor and Meaning**

In America, Thai street food is no longer the side part of the show; it is a movement featuring traditions, creativity, and the possibility of earning. It indicates its cultural contemporaries: a thirst for authenticity, a realignment with memory and being, and the fluidity of new kinds of entrepreneurship.

Pop-up chefs, street vendors, and Thai-American innovators are doing more than serving food to clients; they are connecting cultures, narrating personal and political narratives, and questioning food's significance. Served in a truck in Houston, on a weekend market in Seattle, or in a converted garage in Chicago, Thai street food provides not just a taste but a purpose, recollection, and a place at the party.

Thai street food has an opportunity to make a permanent impact as America diversifies its palate and redefines what success in food can be. It has an enormous potential in commerce, but its cultural influence is even more remarkable. It shows that food is so much more than a meal. Food is connection, food is stories, and more than that, food is community. In this way, Thai street food is not just a food fashion. It is an act of culture, a business, a future, and a salt that seasoned the cloth of a United States identity.

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