

Sustaining The Authentic Malay Cuisine: A Qualitative Inquiry on The Practices of Malay Professional Chefs at Hotels in The Klang Valley

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to identify the practices of Malay chefs in preparing traditional Malay dishes at hotels in the Klang Valley. In addition, this study aimed to identify the level of knowledge and practices of these chefs with regard to traditional cooking and to analyse how the knowledge could be passed on to the younger generation of Malay chefs. In reality, these practices and traditions which include the practices in food preparation, skills and cooking techniques to maintain the authenticity and sustainability of the traditional Malay cuisine are slowly being neglected, especially among those in the hotel industry. The younger generation of Malay chefs no longer seems to take pride in the traditional way of cooking. In addition, the use of processed food in Malay kitchens is very common today. In order to achieve the aims of the study, a qualitative research was conducted. Chefs at various hotels in the Klang Valley were interviewed to determine their current practices. The findings showed that the techniques of cooking traditional Malay foods have been tainted with modern culinary techniques due to a lack of exposure and knowledge in traditional Malay cuisine. In general, traditional cooking methods are viewed as outdated, obsolete and not in accordance to modernisation. By conforming to the style of cooking with modern equipment and technology, this has indirectly altered the prevailing practices of the traditional food preparation in hotels.

Key words: Malay Chefs, Malay cuisine, authenticity, heritage, hotels

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is blessed with lush rainforests and beautiful species of wildlife that attract many tourists to the country. Since 2004, tourist arrivals have been increasing. In fact, tourism has become the second contributor to the economy of Malaysia, contributing up to 7.2 per cent of the national Gross Domestic Products (GDP) after the manufacturing sector in 2011 (Mahony et al., 2011). In addition, the tourism industry in Malaysia is a high priority growth sector (Ramli et al., 2003) and has emerged as an important sector of the Malaysian economy based on the number of business transactions (Yen et al., 2011). The industry has also been regarded as the seventh largest industry contributing to the Gross National Income (GNI) in 2011, after oil, gas and energy; wholesale and retail; palm oil and rubber; financial services; agriculture; and electrical and electronics sectors (Aruna, 2013). Therefore, it is not surprising that the Malaysian government views the tourism sector as a major catalyst for future growth and development (Mahony et al., 2011).

Table 1 shows the number of tourist arrivals and receipts to Malaysia. As can be seen, tourist receipts doubled from 30 billion in 2004 to 60 billion in 2012. It indicates that Malaysia is becoming a major tourist destination in the world. When these tourists come, most would

Table 1. Tourist Arrivals and Receipts to Malaysia

TOURIST ARRIVALS & RECEIPTS TO MALAYSIA		
YEAR	ARRIVALS	RECEIPTS (RM)
2012	25.03 Million	60.6 Billion
2011	24.71 Million	58.3 Billion
2010	24.58 Million	56.5 Billion
2009	23.65 Million	53.4 Billion
2008	22.05 Million	49.6 Billion
2007	20.97 Million	46.1 Billion
2006	17.55 Million	36.3 Billion
2005	16.43 Million	32.0 Billion
2004	15.70 Million	29.7 Billion
2003	10.58 Million	21.3 Billion
2002	13.29 Million	25.8 Billion
2001	12.78 Million	24.2 Billion
2000	10.22 Million	17.3 Billion
1999	7.93 Million	12.3 Billion
1998	5.56 Million	8.6 Billion

(Source: Ministry of Tourism Malaysia, 2013)

like to try the Malaysian cuisine. Although Malaysian cuisine may refer to Malay, Chinese, Indian and East Malaysian dishes, this study focuses on the preparation of traditional Malay dishes.

Problem Statement

The traditional Malay foods served at hotels today need attention with regard to their originality and quality. This is especially so when the pressure to prepare a large amount of food in the hotels may have led the Malay chefs to disregard the traditional elements in cooking Malay foods. To meet the demands for traditional Malay foods, the hotel industry requires the Malay chefs to produce food in large quantities while at the same time, maintain the quality of the dishes. However, in due course, the hotels have driven the Malay chefs to focus more on quantity over quality. A study by MacLennan (1969) found that most hotels are already mass-producing their food because of the demands. Hotels have also started to implement a system whereby they could minimise their cooking methods by replacing authentic ingredients with commercial products. Robinson et al. (2007) claimed that hotels have started to depend on ingredients that are readily accessible such as pre-prepared and outsourced ingredients in their food operation. Even though these issues were based on Western literatures, it must be remembered that the majority of the hotels in Malaysia are dominated by international hotel chains. Thus, it is not impossible if one day, these international chain hotels set a certain standard for their hotels worldwide to implement a readily-available food system at their hotels. This would eventually result in many chefs in the hotels choosing ingredients that have been mass-produced and readily processed rather than fresh ingredients to ease their workload. As a result, the true authentic taste of traditional Malay cuisine will be affected.

At the same time, the Transmission of Food Knowledge (TFK) has generated much interest among academic scholars and practitioners. In order to effectively preserve the local foods, a strategy needs to be devised to tackle these issues. A study by Ibrahim et al. (2009) found that the traditional Malay foods were ranked number four after Western, Indian, Middle Eastern, Chinese and other foods in the Malaysian hotel restaurants by Arab tourists. In another major study, Jalis et al. (2009) found that the majority of the Western tourists did not favour *Nasi Lemak* (rice cooked with coconut milk served with chilli paste or *sambal* and condiments such as cucumber, fried anchovies, peanuts and hard-boiled eggs), one of Malaysian's favourite and a true Malay signature dish. Their study indicated that the tourists did not get the true food culture experience in Malaysia. This is because Malaysian foods are segregated according to the different races and cultures in the country which could sometimes confuse the tourists. While they enjoy Malaysian food in general, it is possible that their experience of savouring traditional Malay food might be affected. As a result, Western tourists were more inclined towards other foods they might be more familiar with, like Chinese noodles and chicken rice (Elis, 2009). This issue has been widely highlighted because it is an evidence to prove that tourists do not receive adequate knowledge, and that there is a lack of publicity in promoting Malay traditional foods to them.

Another issue that is related to the importance of preserving the traditional Malay cuisine is when other neighbouring countries in the region claim that the *Nasi Lemak*, together with other traditional Malaysian foods like *Laksa* (spicy soup noodles) and *Bak Kut Teh* (pork ribs herbal soup) are their traditional food. In his study, Hock (2009), proposed that Malaysia should protect its local foods and not allow other countries to continue making claims that these traditional foods are theirs. Therefore, initiatives have been taken by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) and the National Heritage Centre to develop plans to promote Malaysian traditional foods, both locally and internationally. One of the ways to achieve this is by ensuring the authenticity of these cultural foods is preserved. Therefore, it is important to document the chefs' knowledge, skills and values in the preparation and cooking of Malay foods. This study was designed to fill the gap in the understanding of the practices of Malay chefs' in sustaining the traditional Malay foods at hotels. Therefore, the primary purpose of the study was to determine the practices of Malay chefs in preparing traditional Malay foods at hotels in the Klang Valley. Specifically, the objective of the study was to understand the beliefs and personal values that the Malay chefs applied when preparing traditional Malay foods at the hotels. The research question proposed for this study is "What are the beliefs and personal values embedded in the Malay chefs in preparing traditional Malay foods at hotels?"

Literature Review

Recent Issues and Studies on Traditional Foods in Malaysia

Transmission of Traditional Food Knowledge (TFK)

Kwik (2008) defines Traditional Food Knowledge (TFK) as related to cultural traditions such as food sharing, provisioning skills, techniques and cultural belief passed down from past generations. However, Malaysia is faced with the challenges to sustain its traditional way in food preparations since there is no continuity in knowledge transfer from the older to the younger generations (Nor et al., (2012) & Sharif et al., (2012)). In addition, the lack of interest in traditional foods has also prevented the growth of the Malay traditional foods as the consumption of readily-processed, pre-prepared, packaged and convenience food have weakened the interest of the younger generation to learn the processes involved in preparing traditional Malay foods.

In today's world, most Malaysian mothers go out to work. Due to the contemporary lifestyles, some mothers no longer spend time together with their daughters in the kitchen. As a result, their cooking skills will be affected, which in turn will affect the transfer of knowledge from the mother to the daughter. A study by Kwik (2008) has shown that this lack of interaction between mothers and daughters (or sons) has significantly affected the knowledge on preparing traditional foods among the younger generations. This claim is further supported by Bowen et al. (2011) who stated that in reality, the continuity in preparing traditional foods actually comes from mothers with strong traditional cultural orientation. Mothers are believed to be the 'tradition keepers' who maintain traditional food customs and transmit these to their daughters.

Authenticity in Food

Authenticity is becoming an important issue as it is associated with goods and services. More people are searching for authentic food in order to get the original taste. Sims (2009) defined 'authenticity' as the role it plays within a tourist's holiday experience. This raises the question if the study of authenticity is only important with regard to tourist destination or social context such as dining experience. The concerns of authenticity over traditional food have yet to be discussed, and one tentative proposal might be that the use of food in tourism apparently could enhance the sustainability and the authenticity of a destination (Lin et al., 2010). However, the findings would have been much more persuasive if the authors had considered that the origins of food could trigger the desire of international tourists to familiarise themselves with the local culture, which is usually associated with the local foods (Sims, 2010, cited in Lin et al., 2010, p. 39). The importance of local food products was demonstrated clearly by Sims (2009) who claims that every local product has a story, and the meaning behind it is that it could be related to a place and a culture. Thus, promoting the actual meaning of local foods to tourists rather than consuming the food itself is seen as a way to promote the authenticity of local foods.

Mohammad et al. (2013) synthesised the importance of authenticity of ethnic foods in Kelantan and listed four important elements: heritage and style persistence, nostalgia, freedom from alteration and assurance. However, (Nor et al., 2012, cited in Rozin, 2006, p.81) argued that the authenticity of the Malay traditional foods can be categorised into three major components: the staple ingredients, the principle flavours (lemongrass, ginger, chillies, dried herbs and spices) and cooking methods.

Equipment and Tools

Tan (2004) described that in the past, a typical Malay kitchen must have the sturdy *lesung batu* (mortar and pestle) and *batu giling* (stone roller meant for smoothening out seeds). Usually a Malay kitchen would have the smell of firewood and the daily haze of burning charcoal mingled with the aroma of pungent *belacan* (shrimp paste), red chilli and garlic, fused together in massive heated woks already blackened with use. Leftover food was kept in wooden 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-chat, grind spices, stir pots and practise their cooking skills.

"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"

(Tan, 2004, p. 9).

The use of traditional tools, such as a stone mortar and pestle is believed to release the food's unique taste compared to the use of modern equipment such as a blender or a food processor. The blender for example, is said to only grind the ingredients, unlike the traditional stone mortar which pounds the ingredients uniformly.

Recipes and Ingredients

Another fascinating part of the Malay traditional food lies in the recipes presented in cookbooks. Most of the recipes for Malay food are arranged according to the styles of cooking rather than the main ingredients. For example, usually 'wet' ingredients are mentioned first in the recipes, followed by 'dry' ingredients. Brissenden (2003) explained that though it may be disconcerting at first, the format of the recipes is designed to aid menu construction. Besides, every recipe of the Malay traditional food does not state the accurate measurements as each cooking is the result of each chef's art. However, Brownlie et al. (2005) indicated in his study that a cookbook has to be treated as a cultural product, as objectifications of culinary culture, and as constructed social forms, which are amenable to textual analysis. Therefore, it is not necessary for cookbooks to contain only recipes; they should also include written tales of culinary culture that can be understood by the readers. To sum up, this cultural artefact of food needs to be clearly understood in relation to its social and spatial contexts to which a person belongs.

Cooking Methods and Techniques

Basically, the Malay cooking methods comprise frying, sautéing, steaming, stewing and boiling (Albala, 2011). Zibart (2001) described in his book that cooking methods in Malaysia and Indonesia are fairly limited. He illustrated that in the old days, wood stoves were kept away from the house, in small shacks clustered together in the common back courtyard; and most dishes could either be left to themselves or cooked very quickly. Ling (1998) stated that the Asian cooking does not require sophisticated utensils and methods. The preparation only involved several items, and cooking of certain dishes is much easier.

However, nowadays in Malaysia, charcoal burning stoves made of clay and wood are no longer used in the kitchens of most households, hotels and restaurants. The traditional equipment is hard to find in cities as it may only be used in rural areas and villages, especially during wedding feasts. The adaptation of modern Western equipment has contributed to the development of the food industry in Malaysia. The utilisation of modern equipment is identified as the catalyst for better preparation and cooking to meet the demand and supply in the hotel industry. Besides, the application of this modern technology also helps Malay chefs to convert traditional cooking methods to a modern one, which facilitates their cooking and speeds up cooking time.

The Western kitchen can easily cater to Asian-style of cooking. It is a matter of ignoring the equipment than adding to it, and all methods of Asian cooking may be adapted to what is on hand (Brissenden, 2003). The introduction of modern equipment and technology nowadays has also reduced the preparation time of the traditional Malay foods. As Hutton (2000) explained in his book, modern equipment such as the super-efficient food processor and blender could replace the traditional method of preparing Malay foods. These modern and new appliances act faster and are more efficient compared to the traditional methods. *Lemang* (traditional glutinous rice and coconut milk cooked in bamboo) is one of the examples of foods in which its cooking process has been modernised. There are two ways of cooking *lemang* nowadays. One way is to cook it in a *lemang* machine made from stainless steel tubes in an electric oven, and the other is to half cook the glutinous rice in a pot before transferring

it into a bamboo and continue cooking it with firewood. These two methods have altered the method of cooking *Lemang* and have slowly eliminated the traditional values of the Malay culinary heritage.

Cooking Tips or *Petua*

The Malay community has long been practising cooking tips or *petua* in preparing their foods. Traditional rules or *petua* for cooking are transmitted from mothers to daughters to help prepare traditional dishes more efficiently. In the past, the knowledge and skills of *petua* were only practised by the Malay community in rural areas. Zakaria et al. (2010) in 'Traditional Malay Medicinal Plants' said that it depends very much on the practice, belief and knowledge that each person possesses. As parents and guardians socialise, each child learns about the taste of foods, skills in food preparation, and the selection and production that may be gained or taught explicitly (Kwik, 2008). After all, this informal cultural education connects the cultural identity among the Malays in the family and also in the community. In this context of study, the connection between *petua* and Malay chefs is described in detail as most of the *petua* are transmitted orally and often undocumented. Furthermore, these *petua* are passed on unwritten from one generation of women to the next (Wright et al., 2012).

Basically, the Malays utilise the various resources around them effectively. Based on their experiences and observations through the generations, they are able to identify the effectiveness of certain practices (Zakaria et al., 2010). The *petua* should be practised regularly in the kitchen because not only do they benefit the Malays in cooking effectively, but also the food has been proven to last longer if the *petua* are followed accordingly. With the only access to the ingredients in the kitchen, the *petua* are definitely a valuable guide for Malay cooking. Some of the Malays still practise them till today, and they (the *petua*) have remained popular due to their effectiveness. However, Muhammad (1994) mentioned that as for the Malay traditional medicines, knowledge of treatment methods and materials used was imparted orally and committed to memory, similar to *petua* in cooking. Most of the problems with medicinal skills are that they are only imparted to certain people. There are no written documents to preserve this traditional knowledge. As such, the knowledge is ultimately buried with the dead practitioners (Muhammad, 1994). As Kwik (2008) mentioned in her study, the work of these people (usually women) is often unrecognised and undocumented, and the opportunity for this informal sharing and education to increase personal skills for health and community capacity can be lost. The work of Malay chefs that is associated with the *petua* needs to be documented, including the *petua* that have been practised in hotels for large batches of cooking. Therefore, the need to recognise these *petua* and acknowledge them as professional knowledge in preparing traditional Malay food in hotels are a must for the present generation of Malay chefs.

Methodology

This empirical research adopts a qualitative approach, utilising an in-depth interview method. The research aimed to make a complete analysis and understand the current practices of the Malay chefs in preparing traditional Malay foods at hotels. Since this is a specific study analysing the practices of Malay chefs, a case study research was adopted. The case study was carried out in five selected hotels in the Klang Valley; three were five-star hotels, one was four-star hotel and the other a three-star hotel. The use of case studies as the main method for this research is congruent with Yin's (2009) views that "Case studies are the preferred strategy when "how" or "why" questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over the events, and when the focus is on the contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context" (Yin, 2009, pg. 2). It is therefore clear that due to the nature of the

investigation, this research is susceptible to the qualitative in-depth interview analysis. The use of an in-depth interview as the main method for this research is congruent with the research questions and objectives that could be achieved through the qualitative method. Each participant was interviewed once. On the average, each interview session lasted between one and a half-hour and two hours, depending on how the questions were asked and probed by the interviewer. As Yin (2011) explained, in a single interview, the conversational mode can last up to two hours. This is to encourage the participants to construct their words based on their own experiences and reality. The entire interviews were tape-recorded with permission from the interviewees and then manually transcribed verbatim to ensure that all information was captured and to avoid losing data since not everything could be written down during the interview process.

A pilot study was conducted to ensure the interview protocol developed really measures the intended objectives of the study. An in-depth interview was conducted with five expert Malay chefs working in the Malay kitchen at several hotels. The interviews were focused on the cooking and food preparation of the Malay foods. Based on the comments given by the chefs during the pilot study, the research objectives were refined, and some of the questions were reworded. The research aimed to study the role of Malay chefs and their practices in cooking Malay foods in Malaysia. Data analysed for this study came from individual/chef who have a minimum of 12 years of experience working at selected hotels. In other words, the selection of participants in this study was characterised by their experience in the Malay kitchen in 3-star, 4-star and 5-star hotels in the Klang Valley.

Sampling

Purposive Sampling

A purposive sampling technique was used to identify the Malay chefs who are the participants in this study. The characteristics of individuals (chefs) were used as the basis of selection, most often chosen to reflect the diversity and breadth of the sample population (Wilmot, 2005). Furthermore, according to Hays (2012), these sample participants (chefs) were selected because they met the important and pre-determined criteria. The criteria were: i) The Malay chefs must have had working experience in a 3-star, 4-star or 5-star hotels in Malaysia; ii) The Malay chefs must at the time of the study, be working with a 3-star, 4-star or 5-star hotel in the Klang Valley; iii) The Malay chefs must have at least 12 years of working experience in preparing traditional Malay foods at hotels; iv) The Malay chefs must be willing to share their cooking experiences in preparing traditional Malay foods at hotels; and v) The Malay chefs must have more than 12 years of experience in the Malay kitchen department.

Snowball Sampling

In order to find additional participants that fulfil the criteria set, the snowballing method was used after the purposive sampling technique was applied for the in-depth interviews. First, the chefs were asked if they had any friends who were currently working in a Malay kitchen in hotels in the Klang Valley. Then the chefs were asked if they could recommend and provide the contact details of the Malay chefs who were experts in preparing traditional food to share their knowledge and experience. This snowballing method was used when one of the Malay chefs suggested contacting his friend or a former mentor to be interviewed. A total of sixteen Malay chefs from 3-star, 4-star and 5-star hotels in the Klang Valley were selected as samples for the in-depth interviews of this study. Their selection was based on data saturation points, whereby when no new information emerged from the interviews, the interviews were stopped.

The chefs' knowledge, skills, experience and behaviour in preparing traditional food were analysed during the interview.

Data Collection Procedure

In order to gather the required data, friends and other professional contacts were contacted via telephone calls and email to get their recommendations in getting suitable Malay chefs to participate in this study. Background operations of selected hotels were also studied to obtain detailed information. Telephone calls were made to obtain verbal consent from the Malay chefs to meet for the interview sessions. Then permission and consent letters were sent out to the Malay chefs via emails and faxes to inform them of the importance and purpose of the interview, and the credibility of the organisation involved. Surprisingly, only two chefs asked for the interview questions before agreeing to proceed with the interview sessions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profiles of the Malay Chefs

The investigation on the culinary practices of the 16 selected Malay chefs from 14 hotels showed that they had similar background in terms of age, background and cooking influence. Table 2 displays the demographic profiles of the chefs interviewed.

Table 2. Demographic Profile of the Malay Chefs

Name	Age	Profession	Education (Years)	Experience Rating	Hotel	Hotel
1	50 years old	Malay Banquet Chef	S.P.M	27 years	3-star	Hotel E
2	45 years old	Malay Banquet Chef	S.P.M	22 years	5-star	Hotel F
3	47 years old	Malay Banquet Chef	S.P.M	26 years	5-star	Hotel C
4	45 years old	Malay Banquet Chef	S.P.M	27 years	3-star	Hotel K
5	48 years old	Executive Chef	S.P.M	30 years	4-star	Hotel P
6	44 years old	Malay Banquet Chef	Certificate	22 years	5-star	Hotel B
7	52 years old	Malay Chef	Certificate	34 years	5-star	Hotel G
8	32 years old	Malay Banquet Chef	Certificate	17 years	4-star	Hotel H
9	33 years old	Malay Banquet Chef	Diploma	14 years	5-star	Hotel I
10	31 years old	Jr. Sous Chef	Diploma	12 years	5-star	Hotel J
11	49 years old	Chef de Cuisine	Diploma	32 years	5-star	Hotel F
12	32 years old	Sous Chef	Diploma	13 years	4-star	Hotel M
13	32 years old	Executive Chef	Diploma	12 years	3-star	Hotel D
14	55 years old	Executive Sous Chef and Part-time Lecturer	Degree	37 years	5-star	Hotel A
15	56 years old	Executive Chef	Degree	35 years	4-star	Hotel O
16	56 years old	Malay Chef & Celebrity Chef	Diploma	38 years	5-Star	Hotel A

Table 2 shows that young Malay chefs in this study were in the age range of 30 and 35 years old while the older ones were in the age range of 55 and 60 years old. Table 2 also shows that there were more Malay chefs between 30 and 35 years old working in the hotel industry. Zakaria et al. (2010) pointed out that young culinarians that work in the hospitality industry nowadays need to have an energetic personality; able to be independent, critical, autonomous in self-directed learning; have self-confidence and charismatic leadership skills in order to compete with others in the industry; and able to cope with the demands of the job. This is due to the belief that these young and dynamic chefs are regarded as the successors for the older chefs who have reached 55 years old or above, as highlighted by one Malay chef with 30 years of experience from a 4-star hotel;

“Now, hotels are looking for fresh and energetic young chefs because they can work for long hours and are able to come up with creative ideas. It is not surprising if one day, err if you meet Executive Sous Chefs below the age of 35 years old.”

Beliefs and Values of the Malay Chefs

The beliefs and personal characteristics of these chefs are identified as the most outstanding result that emerged from the data analysis. As Malay chefs, most of them agreed that personal experience in life had led them to achieve career satisfaction. Despite expressing how painful it was to survive in the industry, it was, nevertheless, worthwhile for them. The beliefs and values of the chefs can be categorised into four: influence of tradition keepers, admiration for mothers' cooking and 'air tangan', struggles to become a chef and career-decision making.

Influence of Tradition Keepers

The food culture between Malay chefs and their family is an important finding in this study. A majority of them grew up eating rice, the Malay staple food. Dishes were prepared by mothers, and foods from street vendors were unheard of in a household's food culture. Most of the chefs claimed that they greatly valued the memories of them helping their mothers to prepare and cook the dishes. This explains why these chefs stated family influence as the main reason for them to get involved in the food preparation industry. The chefs remembered the dishes prepared by their mothers and tried to imitate the same taste and smell. This is in accordance with the findings by Gergaud et al. (2012) that the talent of the chef, his/her innate ability to become a great chef, is due, for instance, to any family endowment and his/her personality. In addition, some of these Malay chefs were involved in family businesses and had helped their family members in food preparation in the kitchen. Subsequently, they began to develop a passion for cooking for their family and friends and experiment with recipes.

Chef 6 from a 5-star hotel with 22 years of experience explained how he started cooking and went through a period of poverty in his childhood.

“My parents worked as rubber tappers. My mom left the house every morning with one message, ‘I have cooked white rice for you. The rest of the dishes are up to you.’ That is how I learned to cook.”

The chef had to cook and prepare food for his siblings and at the same time, took over his mother's responsibility. Several Malay chefs also considered the kitchen as a family get-together activity centre where mothers would pass down cooking techniques.

“We learned to cook from our parents, and sometimes they passed down recipes while in the kitchen. There was no formal schooling or cooking class at that time.”

(Chef 15, 35 years of experience, 4-star hotel)

Another important finding was a strong relationship between the influences by tradition keepers reported by the Malay chefs and the tradition keepers that have been explained by Bowens et al. (2011) in their study. Bowen et al. (2011) stated that mothers, as the tradition keepers, were the only adult cooks either in the household or at home in the evening and did not live with extended family members who could share the cooking responsibility. These tradition keepers had also lived with mothers who practised traditional food customs and were in good health and had part-time and/or flexible work hours or did not work outside the home. However, this result did not describe the influence of the fathers in the families. One unanticipated finding is that one of the chefs remembered the traditional Malay dishes prepared by his father that had impressed him so much and led him to pursue his career in culinary.

“My father was the head cook for feasts held in our kampung while my uncle was one of the cooks. I had never been in a kitchen before, and I just observed them cooking from a corner, but surprisingly, I remembered their cooking methods for all the dishes. Neighbours said that my cooking is exactly the same as theirs.”

(Chef 8, 17 years of experience, 4-star hotel)

There are, however, other possible explanations. The purveyors of culture are often the women of the community who are perceived to be the keepers of tradition and sowers of culture in their families and in the larger community. One of the central ways culture is transmitted or transformed is through food practices (Sylva et al., 2011).

Admiration for Mothers' Cooking and 'Air Tangan'

Another important finding is about the knowledge of the Malay chefs in their basic cooking skills. It was interesting to find out that a majority of these Malay chefs started their career with informal basic cooking skills. They used to help their mothers to prepare or cook food. In addition, the majority of them admitted that they were influenced by their mothers' cooking and ways of preparing Malay foods at home. Individual experience, however, varied according to their family backgrounds. One Malay chef briefly explained,

“We used to prepare our own food. Mom taught us how to make laksa noodles from scratch so that we can make it in large quantities and enjoy [it] as much as we can.”

(Chef 6, 22 years of experience, 5-star hotel)

Another Malay chef claimed that he learned to prepare basic ingredients from his mother.

“Mom taught me how to make dried tamarind pulp. My job was to dry it under the sun and identify the dried ones by their change of colour.”

(Chef 5, 30 years of experience, 4-star hotel)

These findings further supported the idea of Zahari (2011) as cited in O'Connor (2008, p. 195), that the possibility of family structure was developed based on parents sharing foods with their offspring. Food and its practices (food ways) bring families and often do not only act as a type of communication mechanism, but metaphorically, they function as a glue that binds individuals in a family together through the sharing and enjoying each other's company thus, keeping familial ties strong. In fact, they even bind people together in many parts of the

world. This was supported by another chef who had similar experience with his mother in the kitchen.

“My mother taught me how to make nipah palm vinegar from scratch. We sprayed the nipah palm and then preserved them for one and a half month. Then we strained them a few times until they became crystal clear vinegar.”

(Chef 5, 30 years of experience, 4-star hotel)

This finding suggests that it was ultimately important for the Malay chefs to preserve their family practices in preparing and cooking traditional Malay food. Families did not only pass down cultural values in food preparations but also influenced and shaped the Malay chefs with strong characters to survive in the hotel industry. Further analysis showed a strong bonding between a mother and the children during food preparation, as explained by Chef 1 from a 3-star hotel with 27 years of experience.

“I used to help my mom prepare traditional Malay ‘kuih’ when she was sick. She taught me how to prepare them from A to Z. That is how I learned to prepare traditional foods.”

It is more about the love between a mother and a child although the initial intention was actually to ease the mother’s burden of earning a living. The most interesting finding is that these practices established the knowledge and skills in preparing traditional Malay food of these Malay chefs, and to some of them, that was the way they maintained the family traditions and continued their food legacy. Kwik (2008) indicated that informal learning for TFK occurred at the family and community levels. Every child learned about food through the process of food taste, and in some cases, through the skills they gained from the food prepared at homes. The results of the study demonstrated that a majority of these Malay chefs used the knowledge, skills and expertise gained from informal learning in their everyday practices. As Chef 11 with 32 years of experience from a 5-star hotel described,

“Mom always told me to help her in the kitchen if I wanted the food to be cooked in a shorter time. I would help her peel the anchovies, remove the bean sprouts, clean the vegetables and so on.”

The most striking results emerged from data gathered were related to *air tangan* that was mentioned by almost all of the chefs involved in the study. It is said that there is no idiomatic phrase in English to best describe *air tangan*, which encompasses both the cooking style and skills of the chefs. The term also refers to the food being prepared using the right ingredients and measurements. In the Malay culture, *air tangan ibu* which broadly refers to a mother’s cooking describes the ‘special touch’ that makes the food tastier (*The Star*, 2006). As chef 5 from a 4-star hotel who has 30 years of experience described:

“It is about a person’s specialty that we call as ‘air tangan’. We can...we can go to those specialties. Like our mom..., ‘air tangan ibu’ right. What is the most favourite dish cooked by our mom? That is what we call as ‘air tangan ibu’. For example, chicken cooked in red sauce is the most satisfying and delicious food cooked by our mom, and we are so comfortable with the food. Hence, every time we go back to our mom’s house, we will request for that dish. So, we have something in our mind and heart that mom’s cooked food is the best of all in this world.”

Chef 14 with 37 years of experience from a 5-star hotel defined *air tangan* as describing someone who is an expert in cooking and specialises in certain dishes. He said,

“Air tangan is actually a trademark for a person who is an expert [and] can cook any specific dishes. It can be from any range of Malay foods, but it must be perfect in every angle in terms of taste, texture, flavour and recipes.”

Chef 14 also stated that *air tangan* is about a person who cooks from the heart and for the love of the cuisine.

“As for me, ‘air tangan’ is more suitable to describe a person who values [his or her] cooking and has fantastic techniques, passion and knowledge of food. It is about cooking up food for the stomach, the soul and the mind. That is what I call ‘air tangan’.”

Taken together, these findings suggest that there is an association between tradition keepers, admiration for mothers’ cooking, *air tangan* and informal cooking learned by the majority of the Malay chefs in this study. In other words, the Malay chefs’ informal education was passed down by their mothers and families while they were helping them with cooking in the kitchen at home. This is in accordance to De Backer’s (2013) findings that mothers are the most influential persons in families in terms of recalled cookery of (grand) parents and the use of family recipes. In addition, these findings supported that bonding experience with mothers served as guidelines for these Malay chefs as they perform their work as chefs in hotels. It is apparent from these findings that the practices have shaped their skills and talents in cooking traditional foods. Chef 14 with 37 years of experience from a 5-star hotel stated that;

“Mom always told me that I have to help her in the kitchen in order to get the extra money for school. She sold traditional Malay sweet and savoury ‘kuih’ in the market. Of course I wanted to help her because of the extra money. But now, I feel really grateful for that experience.”

Interestingly, only the senior Malay chefs shared these unforgettable memories during the interview sessions and reflected how their past experience has made an impact on their career. The identified indicators of the beliefs and values embedded among the Malay chefs are described in the following table, using the code INF that stands for Influences.

Table 3. Identified Indicators that Influences the Tradition Keepers and Mothers’ Cooking among the Malay Chefs

Coding	Indicator Descriptions
INF1	Most of the Malay chefs were influenced by the female family members at home.
INF1	A majority of the Malay chefs kept mentioning about their mothers’ cooking in the interview, followed by their sisters, brothers and other extended family members.
INF1	A majority admitted that their mothers’ cooking is the best food that they have savoured in their life.
INF1	Most of the Malay chefs agreed that their interests and passion in cooking were attributed by family influences such as being involved in their family’s small business, fulfilling their responsibility as the eldest brother, helping their mothers and getting accustomed to the kitchen.
INF1	‘ <i>Air tangan</i> ’ or personal cooking touch by their mothers was mentioned by the majority of the Malay chefs in this study. This is the most important element that has influenced their cooking and food preparation.

All the chefs interviewed in this research had at least 12 years of working experience in a Malay kitchen; therefore, those having 12 years of experience or more were considered as 'senior chefs' while those with less than 12 years of experience were considered as 'junior chefs'. It is interesting to note that none of the junior chefs involved in the interview described the informal learning gained at home through their families. This is the major difference that was spotted during the interview sessions involving the senior and junior Malay chefs. This finding matched with those observed in earlier studies done by Abdullah et al. (2013) that many of the Malay food preparation terminologies are no longer learned by the ordinary youngsters, the young professional chefs and culinarians in the industry. Furthermore, most of the young Malay staff was not fully equipped with strong foundations and knowledge in preparing the Malay foods according to the culture and traditions practised by the family. Chef 10 with 12 years of experience from a 3-star hotel expressed that he had no formal training in food preparation at home and had never thought of becoming a chef.

"I graduated from an Islamic college, and I was not sure about my future after finishing school. So, my family insisted that I enrolled in a culinary school at a government institution. But, the problems were, I [had] never cooked a meal, and my mom never taught me how to cook."

This finding confirmed the association between de-skilling in Short's (2003) study that lack of opportunity for children to inherit cooking skills from parents and guardians was due to the routinely used pre-prepared foods (cited in Lang, 1993; Leith, 1998; & Street, 1994). Thus, in order to preserve these cultural values, a definitive mind-set and goals have to be set forth in place so that the traditions can withstand the test of time. The impact of the fast-paced and modern lifestyle has atrophied informal cultural education at home. Furthermore, the practice of informal education at home is normally not documented on paper, not measured with scaled apparatus and not refined in steps taken to produce the best results out of the procedures. Hence, these affect the preservation of cultural food knowledge and the best practices.

Struggles to become a Malay Chef

The on-going life experiences of the Malay chefs were discussed, and they described their journey as 'challenging times' and 'tough' as they were to earn a living. As Daniel et al. (1996) emphasised, "Going through the thorns to get to the roses" came to "symbolise the struggles, the difficult times, and in order to obtain anything of value, it would require painful experiences" (p. 196). However, according to these chefs, these experiences were memorable and worthwhile since they have made them stronger and become successful chefs. Chef 15 from a 4-star hotel with 35 years of experience briefly explained that,

"The best recipes in cooking are the willingness to work wholeheartedly. They make us bring out the best in our dishes."

The difference in the commitment showed by the chefs' present and past employees was also noticed by these chefs. Salmons (2002) called it as a mechanism that might facilitate mobility for the chefs' strong commitment in their careers, and the detachment from their employers as they were willing to stay in an occupation with such long hours, relatively low pay (for many years, until they reached higher positions) and treacherous work conditions. Chef 14 in a 5-star hotel with 37 years of experiences elaborated,

"Before, staff members were willing to work extra hours to learn more from the head chef. Most of them started from the lowest level and were very determined to get promoted in the kitchen department."

This finding is in agreement with Balazs' (2002) findings which showed that chefs in restaurants usually work hard because they perceive their work as meaningful. They rather work for long hours at supersonic speed and with hardly any rest because they perceive that they are contributing to something special. As chef 14 from a 5-star hotel with 37 years of experience explained:

"Most of the cooks in the Malay kitchen were from rural villages (kampong) and were poor. They just wanted to find good jobs and earn money to help their family."

Lack of job opportunities is a great hindrance to the Malays who come from rural villages in search of employment, especially when they have no qualifications to back them up. This obstacle has led them to take what is available and then learn their way through. Chef 6 in a 5-star hotel with 22 years of experience described this matter in details:

"As a Malay chef, I [have] never restricted myself from learning. It does not matter if I have to learn from the junior staff because their knowledge is different from ours. They have the Internet, magazines and so many unlimited accesses to new knowledge. It is a matter of experience and skills that make us different. I like to hear new ideas and [gain] knowledge from young, talented staff."

Chef 9 supported the above statement by describing his food and research development team at the hotel:

"Our team will do a research first on a specific food such as 'Nasi Biryani'. Then we scout for the best 'Nasi Biryani' in Malaysia and plan our trip there. Our analysis is based on the ingredients and recipes, and if we are lucky enough, the cooks willingly explain their secret recipes."

(14 years of experience, 5-star hotel)

This finding confirmed the association between chefs and learning process. A study by Paulsson et al. (2005) reported that an increased control of the learning process by the workers develops competency in a more stimulating way, and likely to simplify their work and reduce (learning-related) stress. At the same time, it could allow the employees to control their learning and also allow time for the learning processes and reflection. As Chef 10 illustrated his on-going process of learning to cook Malay foods in the interview,

"I like to socialise with senior citizens during weddings. They are experts when it comes to cooking a large amount of food. I made sure that I am involved in the food preparations from scratch. That is how I did my own research on Malay traditional foods."

(12 years of experience, 3-star hotel)

As a result, Malay chefs who had access to new information on traditional foods gained major benefits to be unique compared to other Malay chefs when it comes to serving Malay foods.

Understanding a Chef's Identity and Career Path

This section discusses the findings based on the questions related to the chefs' decision on career choice and social mobility in the hotel industry in order to increase their value and self-esteem. The hotel industry is a tough occupational sector, and job hopping is viewed as a way to pursue their dreams. Maguire et al. (2012) found that people are often inappropriately

pushed into a career in catering, i.e., catering was not seen as a preferred option but as the last resort career. This attitude and outcome were seen to detract from the professional image that the chefs sought. The responses to these questions were elaborated by chef 12,

“My Executive Chef told me that it was not easy to train and develop young [and] talented staff for Malay foods. He had a problem before when a few Malay staff he trained to be Malay chefs quit and moved to other departments. He advised me [on] the values of being a Malay chef and was willing to offer me an increment and position should I ever felt like leaving.”

(13 years of experience, 4-star hotel)

A few of the senior Malay chefs also revealed that the younger Malay chefs lacked the spirit and values in their cooking preparations. Learning to cook was not a matter of years a chef spent in a college; it was a matter related to passion and determination to gain skills, experience and knowledge in the kitchen.

“They do not have patience in cooking. Yes, they are energetic, but the values in their cooking have shown that they need to learn a lot more. They have to go through the blood, sweat and tears in the kitchen before they can succeed in the profession.”

(Chef 2, 22 years of experience, 5-star hotel)

Chef 8 from a 4-star hotel however, believed that hard work could beat talent. He asserted how hard work could pay off for the young Malay chefs,

“I don’t need a good chef with no brain! It’s okay to have people with no background in cooking, but they must possess good attitude and high discipline in working. That’s all.”

(Chef 8, 17 years of experience, 4-star hotel)

It seemed like this discrepancy could be attributed to the young Malay chefs’ attitude in their career choice. They assumed that in order to get a higher position, job hopping was considered as a strategic move for them to be more focused in their career. They also believed that job hopping needed careful considerations, especially for higher positions and responsibilities so that they can move forward together with the new environment. Chef 2 explained in the interview:

“We need to polish our knowledge, skills and expertise from time to time. That is why we have to move from one hotel to another. Salary and position are also the biggest motivation for our career accomplishments.”

(Chef 11, 32 years of experience, 5-star hotel)

Some of the Malay chefs explained about the urgency of the hotel industry to seek a good and highly disciplined team. The hotel industry is high-risk and challenging. Only those who manage to cope with the responsibilities in the kitchens would be able to stay for a long term.

“I started my career in a Malay restaurant in the 70s called Yasmin’s Restaurant. I was among the third batch of Malay chefs at that restaurant. Most of the pioneer Malay chefs developed their expertise and knowledge in that restaurant, and it was like a dream workplace. I was lucky enough to be part of the staff and entered the restaurant with the intention of becoming a professional chef.”

(Chef 1, 27 years of experience, 3-star hotel)

A majority of the Malay chefs suggested that pursuing a career as a chef is more about opportunities,

“The advantages of job-hopping are learning from different mentors and absorbing more knowledge, skills and expertise. I used to have a mentor in Malay food whose methods of training was to mould young chefs to become ‘somebody’ in the industry in the future.”

(Chef 4, 27 years of experience, 3-star hotel)

To become skilful, one needs to seek the best opportunity the job could offer. One of the Malay chefs stressed,

“Personally, I think that a chef’s career opportunities are all about learning experience, knowledge, skills and expertise. Money is number two. Of course, our aim is to fill up the top position, and that is why we have to move and look for opportunities. Determination, initiatives and hard work are the push factors for us to succeed in our career.”

(Chef 14, 37 years of experience, 5-star hotel)

Opportunities come in many ways, and one is the opportunity to become a famous chef. As one Malay chef commented,

“I like to do my own research on Malay foods. When I move to another hotel, I will make sure that I learn something new. The secret is to keep on learning and searching for the best.”

(Chef 3, 26 years of experience, 5-star hotel)

In order to become the head chef in Malay foods, the chefs need to be persistent in terms of discipline, dedication and motivation to develop themselves as leaders. As chef 9 with 14 years of experiences indicated in the interview,

“I love to challenge myself with new things. The executive chef of this hotel asked me whether I was interested to join his new team. This hotel had a bad reputation for their Malay foods. So, we had to develop a new team, menu, marketing and promotional strategies to build up the hotel’s name. Now I am happy with what I have done to this hotel, and people are starting to recognise my talent.”

(5-star hotel)

Being a good leader means facing great challenges; as the saying goes, ‘It is not always a clear road to the top’. This was admitted by Chef 5 from a 4-star hotel in the interview.

“I had worked in hotels in 5 countries. Job-hopping is necessary for us in this hotel industry because we need to challenge ourselves to be better. We cannot get those resources in only one hotel. Therefore, I chose to travel around the world to enhance my learning experience.”

(30 years of experience)

The Scottish chef, Gordon Ramsay, describes the rules and norms of a chef’s life as “the knowledge”. Ramsay’s concept of knowledge is important as it points to the systematic transfer of culture, identity and a sense of belonging among the group members. To belong is to gain access to the knowledge and to earn the right to be called a chef (quoted in Palmer et al.,

2010). In summary, the indicators identified for career decision made among the Malay chefs are elaborated in Table 4.3 using the code DM that stands for Decision Making.

CONCLUSION

The values of cultural and traditional food knowledge practised by the Malay chefs in preparing traditional foods in hotels reflect the transfer of knowledge among the Malay communities as a whole. Knowledge on cultural foods gives the Malay chefs a sense of belonging to the traditions that they practise in their daily life. Their knowledge on the traditional Malay foods acts as an example on how dissemination of cultural knowledge asserts the cultural identity among the Malay chefs. Understanding the importance of this knowledge provides insights to the researcher in studying the preparation methods of traditional Malay foods by the Malay chefs in hotels. Even though they work in a commercial sector, the Malay cultural and traditional values are evident in their daily practices. Beyond the informal learning they obtained at home, they have bridged the gap between generations through shared activities such as food preparations in collective Malay kitchens.

In this study, the researcher concentrated on the cultural food practices by the Malay chefs in preparing traditional Malay foods in some hotels in the Klang valley. Unfortunately in Malaysia, the study of cultural knowledge in the commercial sector is still in its infancy. Documentation on this topic is scarce, if not unavailable. In fact, based on the researcher's experience, there are evidences of misunderstanding in the conceptions between the traditional practices and modern technologies applied in the Malay kitchens at hotels. There is a high probability that Malay food that are not prepared the traditional way will affect their true authentic taste. Therefore, the study of the Malay chefs' current practices in preparing traditional foods is a crucial effort to conserve and preserve the Malay cultural heritage.

The study revealed that the traditional food preparations as practised by the Malay chefs at hotels carried significant cultural characteristics practised by the Malay community in the village. This study outlined four major characteristics of the practices of the Malay chefs in the Results and Analysis sections. The hoteliers and academic scholars could utilise these characteristics to understand food cultural knowledge applied by the Malay chefs in their food preparations and later apply these characteristics in their restaurants, hotels, schools and colleges. By applying the methodologies used in this study, it is believed that the preparations of the traditional Malay foods in hotels will have a distinct identity that would become the pride of the Malay community even though it is being prepared in a commercial environment. However, these findings are not exhaustive to represent the solid characteristics of Malay traditional food preparations as the involvement of modern technologies does facilitate the work of these Malay chefs in their daily work life. A detailed study on Malay cultural foods in the village or in the Malay community should contribute to a better understanding of the Malay food heritage in addition to revealing the identity and the image of the Malay foods. This research is a profound study in cultural food knowledge in the commercial environment, which is the hotel industry, and it is hoped to generate more interests in the subject matter.

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