

Urban Brokers of Rural Cuisine: Assembling National Cuisine at Cambodian Soup-Pot Restaurants

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Pre-prepared food venues (or soup-pot restaurants) in Cambodia and other Asian countries make their decisions about what to cook in a complex food–society nexus, factoring in their culinary skill, seasonality of ingredients, and diners' expectations for variety. As such, soup-pot restaurants exist as tenuous brokers between rural food customs and the prevailing expectations of city dwellers. In urban areas, they are a transparent window into seasonality and market cycles, as well as an opportunity to encounter culinary diversity and participate in the consolidation of an everyday 'national cuisine'. Soup-pot restaurants, in contrast to other restaurant formats, craft an experience that balances the agricultural and social dynamics of rural eating customs with city comforts. Typically, soup-pot restaurants can accomplish this while also serving as a space of dietary learning, providing meals that are culturally understood to be balanced and nutritious, and garnering support for local cuisine from across the socio-economic spectrum. As a site of research, these restaurants can be seen as potential innovators for managing the consequences of industrialization on food and agriculture, facilitating democratic daily practices of food sovereignty.

Keywords: Cambodia; Food; National Cuisine; Nutrition; Urbanization

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Restaurants in Kambodscha und anderen asiatischen Ländern, wo vorgefertigtes Essen angeboten wird (sogenannte Soup-pot-Restaurants), gestalten ihren täglichen Speiseplan aus komplexen Gesichtspunkten der Ernährung, der jeweils eigenen Kochkenntnisse, der saisonalen Verfügbarkeit der Zutaten und den Ansprüchen der Gäste an einen abwechslungsreichen Speiseplan. Soup-pot-Restaurants spielen eine Vermittlungsrolle zwischen ländlichen Kochsitten und den Ansprüchen der städtischen Bevölkerung. In urbanen Gebieten spiegeln sie die saisonale Verfügbarkeit und Marktzyklen wieder und bieten gleichzeitig den Kunden die Möglichkeit, die kulinarische Vielfalt zu erschließen und sich so auch an dem Fortbestand der „nationalen Küche“ zu beteiligen. Im Gegensatz zu anderen Restaurant-Formen, schaffen die Soup-pot-Restaurants eine Art von Ausgleich zwischen der landwirtschaftlich-sozialen Dynamik der ländlichen Essgewohnheiten und den städtischen Annehmlichkeiten. Zusätzlich dazu fungieren Soup-pot-Restaurants als Quelle für Nahrungswissen und regionale Küche für eine breite sozioökonomische Kundenschicht. Außerdem entsprechen die angebotenen Mahlzeiten den kulturellen Erwartungen für ausgewogene Ernährung. Als Forschungsfeld dienen diese Restaurants als Musterbeispiel für die Bewältigung der Folgen der Industrialisierung in der Ernährung und Landwirtschaft und für die tägliche Praxis der Ernährungssouveränität.

Schlagworte: Ernährung; Essen; Kambodscha; nationale Küche; Urbanisierung

INTRODUCTION: THE RURAL-URBAN FOOD NEXUS

It is a truism that cuisines worldwide originate in the diffuse rural sphere, typically in tandem with local agriculture. Rural areas provide a constant agriculturally-based influx of culinary habits to the cities through a combination of the dynamics of migration and the types of food delivered. In turn, these habits are gradually integrated into the prevailing – more cosmopolitan – contexts. While modern trade and logistics have made it possible for some of the produce of more distant rural areas (i.e. from other continents) to become accessible in urban markets, agricultural and also social inputs that are geographically closer (typically deriving from domestic agriculture) remain a powerful reference point for most culinary systems. Indeed, despite increasing disjuncture in the cultural economy of food and agriculture through globalization (Appadurai, 1990, p. 301), the material basis of many cuisines remains anchored, if sometimes only symbolically, to the food products and habits of the nearby rural sphere (Nützenadel & Trentmann, 2008, pp. 5–6). This is largely still the case in Cambodia, the focus of this paper. It should be noted that in highlighting this, I do not argue away the significance of the ongoing ‘de-localization’ of nutrition through trade, nor the increasing importance of ideological dimensions of cuisine, such as national identity (see Ferguson, 2010; Montanari, 2006) and commoditization (i.e. tourism and trade promotion) (see Chuang, 2009; Firat, 1995; Henderson, 2004). Indeed, these aspects are very much on parade in heavily urbanized and food-import dependent countries in Southeast Asia, such as Singapore and Brunei. In these countries, the competitive sensibilities of ‘culinary nationalism’ (i.e. Ferguson, 2010)¹ figure prominently (see Henderson, 2014; Ikhwan, 2014) and are even championed by the government (see Henderson, 2004; “Local Cuisine”, 2012; Saunders, 2004).

With its grounding in Cambodia, a less globally dominant food player, this paper circumscribes many of the dominant trends in the research described above. It is oriented instead on understanding why the factual existence and/or imaginary of nearby agriculture and rural culinary habits exert such a considerable sway in spite of the increasing availability of imported food and culinary cultural models. In other contexts, this ‘stubbornness’ has been ascribed to the rise of food movements, the resistance to globalization (Friedland, 2010), or the efforts to protect biodiversity (Burlingame, 2012). In seeking explanations that more accurately characterize rural-dominated developing countries such as Cambodia, this paper takes a closer look into how the cumulative impact of the routinized transformation and consolidation of rural food habits in the rural-urban nexus contributes to a generalized popular knowledge and the awareness of ‘national cuisine’. This paper stops short, however, of projecting the future of Khmer national cuisine.

In the sense that it is used in this paper, national cuisine is not represented by flagship dishes accessible to tourists (such as *Phat Thai*, Vietnamese *Phở*, Cambodian *Amok* curry, or Laotian *Larb*), what is inscribed in cookbooks (see Appadurai, 1988), nor by the foods named after a modern state such as Singaporean fish-head curry

1 Addressing the competitive cross-border identity building directly, Ferguson (2010, p. 105) writes: “The movement of goods and the blurring of borders notwithstanding, more and more countries propose culinary distinction as a marker of identity. From Austria to Singapore, from Norway to Brazil, aspiring culinary countries vaunt their edible traditions and indigenous foods to promote both tourism and exports.”

(these anyway being regularly contested). For the purposes of this paper, I define national cuisine as the range of foods that are widely known, qualitatively understood, and regularly consumed by urban people of a collective ethnic background. Cambodia, and more specifically its capital Phnom Penh, is a model case in this respect as it is fairly homogeneous in terms of ethnicity (98 percent Khmer)² and is still in the early stages of urbanization following a period of forced ruralization in the 1970's (described more thoroughly in Fallavier, 2003; Simone, 2008). The country is still 73 percent rural/agriculturally-based, yet it is experiencing rapid rural-to-urban migration,³ with the consequence that the nexus between agrarian change and urbanization presents a particularly active arena in which national cuisine is being negotiated and forged. The goal of this research is to examine the emergence of national cuisine at the rural-urban interface, preferably in a setting in which identity politics and globalization take a backseat to the daily routines of sourcing ingredients and making food. In this everyday setting, what can we observe about the negotiation over national cuisine and the role played by food makers, consumers, and food markets?

The search for a locale expressing this dynamic led me to what I refer to as a soup-pot restaurant, which is essentially a working class purveyor of various rural Khmer culinary traditions. For Cambodians, soup-pot restaurants fall under the linguistic rubric of *haan bai* (the generic term for 'rice stall'), which includes both stalls serving made-to-order food as well as those serving pre-prepared food⁴ (usually from large aluminum pots; see Figure 1 for a typical soup-pot shop front). As described in greater detail in the sections below, soup-pot restaurants are typically inexpensive and family-run, making them suitable not only for recent immigrants with low wages and conservative tastes, but also for anyone seeking a culinary experience comparable to home cooking. As a consequence, the owner-operators of soup-pot restaurants play the role of brokers between their individual (usually rural) culinary heritage and urban expectations of food, hygiene, and service. With this dynamic in mind, this research set out to study how the day-to-day operations of these ubiquitous restaurants work to consolidate the diversity of Khmer cuisine, both in their independent cooking decisions and in their response to customer demand. Because soup-pot restaurants capture such a wide range of customers in terms of demographics (a point I will address below), culinary trends that emerge in the routine of operating these restaurants are, in the evolutionary sense, continually selecting and distilling the diversity of regional Khmer cuisine into a national cuisine. In doing so, they are creating a basis for food sovereignty and setting the stage for managing globalization on more advantageous terms.

2 Based on the Cambodian Social Economic Survey, 2013. For more details, see National Institute of Statistics (NIS): <http://www.nis.gov.kh/index.php/en/find-statistic/social-statistics/csescsescs-tables.html>

3 Nationwide, urban population growth from 2000 to 2010 has averaged around 4.3 percent (Cambodia Development Resource Institute, 2012). This statistic does not, however, account for dynamics introduced by temporary rural-urban mobility, commuting, and the predominance of only two major cities in absorbing urban migrants.

4 Curiously, there is no specific word or phrase or even a generally agreed-upon set of terms in Khmer for 'soup-pot restaurant'. In discussions about this subject, informants and I would generally agree to talk about 'places serving pre-prepared food' or 'food in pots'.



Figure 1: A soup-pot shop front in Phnom Penh (photo by Hart N. Feuer).

For this research, I studied a cross-section of the restaurant scene between January and November 2014, representing diners, restaurateurs, and local markets in Phnom Penh. Specifically, I surveyed 120 Phnom Penh residents cluster-sampled across the categories of age, socio-economic class, and gender.⁵ I also conducted embedded participant observation in 15 soup-pot restaurants and 9 to-order restaurants in different economic zones of the city. In addition, I accompanied the chefs of 10 restaurants (both soup-pot and to-order) to fresh food markets over a period of 6 months to ascertain the logic behind food purchases and the dynamics of seasonality of vegetables, fish, and fruit. All interviews were conducted by the author in Khmer language and all quotes appearing in this text were also translated by the author.

SOUP-POT RESTAURANTS AND THE URBAN INTERFACE

In many Southeast Asian countries like Cambodia that are experiencing a transition from small-holder agriculture to corporate farming and urban life, the basis of nutrition (and hence, of culinary practices) is necessarily shifting. The nature of this change, by definition, is associated with the dynamics of urbanization – who, how many, and for what reason are people moving? Although Phnom Penh's migration is dominated by a young demographic – primarily young women seeking jobs in the textile industry and young men with insufficient land to farm – the phenomena of

⁵ Interviews were conducted randomly over a period of three months in June-August 2014 at the parking area of the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority – a place where nearly every family will come to pay the water bill on a 3-month cycle.

land sale, dispossession, and micro-entrepreneurship have continued to bring entire families into the city (Derks, 2008, p. 7; Scheidel et al., 2013). However, even as the nominal levels of urbanization have increased, observers of Phnom Penh have, in fact, characterized the enduring rural character of the city (see Saphan, 2011; Simone, 2008), describing it as having the atmosphere of a large village. In previous work (Feuer, 2011), I have also outlined how the farming background of most current city dwellers in Cambodia is associated with greater appreciation of food variety, the quality of produce, and the sanctity of balanced meals. This is necessarily associated with the way in which cuisine in the city is understood, negotiated, and evaluated. A first-generation city dweller in Phnom Penh highlighted these changes clearly in a conversation in a soup-pot restaurant:

When I was growing up, we only ate foods that were in season. Every season was an exciting time to get something new and fresh. Sometimes the fruit trees were ready, sometimes the long beans were ripe. My parents did not even have to harvest themselves because we, children were so happy to go collect things from the fields. At that time, I thought we just got lucky and nature gave us things to eat when we needed them but now I know that my parents planted everything carefully so we would have tasty and good things all year long. [HF: How about now, in Phnom Penh?] In the city? It feels a bit like this but different. We can have anything, anytime we want but now we have to decide every day what we should eat; before, the fields helped decide this for us. And now, we only enjoy real fresh products if we get visitors from the countryside or if we visit home. (female accountant, lower-middle class, age 28, Phnom Penh, personal communication, 3. February 2014)

As this woman describes, not only has the basis of nutrition planning moved from long-term (i.e. using an agricultural time-frame) to short-term (i.e. daily decisions at the urban market) but the relationship between seasonal agriculture and food preparation has also deteriorated as a result of living in the city. In other words, culinary and nutritional habits that were rooted in a nexus of agricultural planning and agro-ecological constraints (see Halwart, 2006) are now more a matter of arbitrary, immediate food cravings and availability in the city markets (Drewnowski & Popkin, 1997). This narrative of becoming alienated from the rhythms of seasonality and nature re-appeared in various forms in most conversations I led with first and even second generation immigrants to Phnom Penh whom I met in soup-pot restaurants. A related, and similarly popular topic, however, was that eating at soup-pot restaurants was a step back into this rural food atmosphere, with respondents describing the restaurants variously as 'pure Khmer', 'real Khmer', 'like home', 'traditional', 'the usual [positive connotation]', and 'healthy'.

While the accuracy of these various descriptions will be taken up over the next few sections, it is important to stand back and ask if the borderline-romantic notions surrounding soup-pot restaurants are actually relevant: Do they translate into popularity? The short answer is: They are unquestionably the most popular dining format⁶ in Phnom Penh among all socio-economic levels. According to my survey of

6 See Table 2 for a listing of competing restaurant formats.

120 residents (excluding foreigners) in 2014, all varieties of *haan bai*, which includes both to-order restaurants and soup-pot restaurants, host approximately 78 percent of all meals out in the city (see Table 1). Of all the meals in *haan bai*, 72 percent are taken in soup-pot restaurants (28 percent in to-order restaurants). Another way of seeing this is that 56 percent of all meals out (including to-order restaurants, branded restaurants, mall food courts, and foreign-food restaurants) are taken in soup-pot restaurants.

	Approximate socio-economic background				
	Poorest	Lower-middle	Middle	Upper	Average
% of all meals out in all <i>haan bai</i>	94,1	87,9	75,8	58,9	77,6
% of all meals out in soup-pot restaurants	88,2	65,5	51,6	32,1	56,2
% of <i>haan bai</i> meals at soup-pot restaurants	93,8	74,5	68,1	54,5	72,4

Table 1: Relative popularity of the different types of *haan bai* (n=120) (own data).⁷

While the relative popularity of this restaurant format is generally high, there are a few dynamics which arise when one looks at the weekly dining habits of various groups (see Table 2). First, the popularity of *haan bai* is inversely correlated with socio-economic status, with richer people proportionately favoring branded restaurants, food courts, and tourist restaurants relative to lower socio-economic strata. In spite of this relative difference, soup-pot restaurants remain the most popular form of dining even among the richest strata (1.8 times per week or 32 percent of all meals out). Among the poorest strata, families dine out almost exclusively in soup-pot restaurants (3.0 times per week or 94 percent of all meals out). Second, entertainment dining (such as going out for snacks, to a café, or a night-life locale) becomes increasingly prevalent at higher socio-economic levels, although it cannot be determined if this has an independent impact on where people take their full meals each day. Third, while the trend visible in Table 2 suggests that economic mobility allows people to diversify their dining choices, the absolute popularity of soup-pot restaurants among lower-middle and middle-class people remains robust. This suggests, on face value, that the broader set of restaurant options available at higher incomes, rather than class identity, determine routine dining choices (more on this below). Finally, unusual dining options that are not listed here (such as office canteens, buffet restaurants, and restaurant-café) are not included in this sample but were, at the time of surveying, a relatively small factor (mentioned only 5 times in 120 surveys).

Given the robust popularity of *haan bai*, and more specifically of soup-pot restaurants, I made a point of interviewing *haan bai* diners across the socio-economic

⁷ Socio-economic background was triangulated through a number of factors. If salary information was available, it was used as one basis, yet many other factors were also considered, such as the family income and non-salary income sources as well as the informant's mode of transportation, mobile phone model, and other outward characteristics used in a contextual manner (such as appearance and accent) for substantiation. Roughly speaking, the poorest earn adjusted monthly salaries of USD 150 or less; lower-middle income class up to USD 400; middle-class up to USD 1,000; and upper-classes above USD 1,000.

Dining-out location	Approximate socio-economic background				
	Poorest	Lower-middle	Middle	Upper	Average
Soup-pot	3,0	3,8	3,2	1,8	3,0
To-order	0,2	1,3	1,5	1,5	1,1
Branded restaurant	0,1	0,3	0,6	1,1	0,5
Mall or food court	0,1	0,4	0,7	0,9	0,5
Tourist restaurant	0,0	0,0	0,2	0,3	0,1
Snack	1,1	1,7	2,3	2,8	1,9
Night-life locale	1,0	1,3	2,3	2,6	1,8
Café	0,7	2,1	3,0	3,2	2,3
Total entertainment out/week	2,8	5,1	7,6	8,6	6,0
Total dining out/week	3,4	5,8	6,2	5,6	5,3

Table 2: Weekly dining-out locations of Phnom Penh residents (n=120) (own data).

spectrum in order to clarify the motivations or justifications explaining the egalitarian popularity of these venues. In the quotes below, the inertia behind the abstract of Khmer cuisine becomes apparent:

I like to try many kinds of new food, but to fill my belly every day I still prefer Khmer food. *Haan bai* are the best place to get regular Khmer food. And they are cheap too. (male electronics salesperson, lower-middle class, age 24, personal communication, 5. May 2014)

My family likes Khmer food every day. Even if I bring bread, I still have to bring soup and fried food or else they will complain. The *haan bai* around here always have something tasty. (female house-wife, upper class, age 31, personal communication 15. May 2014)

Furthermore, the utility and efficiency of the soup-pot restaurant model for both patron and restaurateur helps to explain why it remains such a popular institution in Phnom Penh, as demonstrated by the following statements from both owners and patrons:

I used to have a to-order restaurant, but it was not so easy to run. I had to buy so many kinds of ingredients and cook them in a hurry when people came. I wasted a lot and I think the food was not so good. Now I just choose a few dishes for the day and take my time serving instead of being in the hot kitchen. (female restaurateur, age 40, personal communication, 8. October 2014)

I like to look at and smell all the foods when I go to a [soup-pot] restaurant. It makes my decision easier. And if I'm with a group, we can decide together. (male patron, age 17, with a group of four fellow students, personal communication, 6. June 2014)

If I'm in a hurry, I always go to the [soup-pot] restaurant because I can choose fast and they can wrap it up to go easily. (female hairdresser, age 21, personal communication, 6. June 2014)

While price is also a determining factor, particularly for lower socio-economic groups, patrons regularly praised the convenience, familiarity, and transparency of the soup-pot model. Because soup-pot restaurateurs typically display the options in the entryway (or roadside), patrons have the opportunity to smell, pose questions, discuss with their group, and even interact with the food (stir, flip, or touch) before settling on their choice. At the same time, they can evaluate the hygiene of the food and atmosphere of the location before entering the interior. If they are not immediately satisfied, it is not unusual (or impolite) for a patron to politely walk away.

In contrast, to-order restaurants require patrons to commit to a seat in the restaurant and trust that the food emerging from the kitchen will be tasty and hygienic. Nevertheless, to-order stalls also play an important set of roles for various diners; for example, while a soup-pot restaurant may run out of food or close early, to-order restaurants will be available for those who cannot eat during normal meal hours. Soup-pot restaurants are also typically less active during dinner, a meal many families (including restaurateurs themselves) prefer to eat at home. As a consequence, in the evening when soup-pot restaurants are either closed or are merely serving leftovers, to-order restaurants can prepare freshly-cooked food. Needless to say, for those in the mood for something specific, a to-order restaurant is a better choice.

In this section, I showed that soup-pot restaurants are a highly popular feature of Phnom Penh's urban landscape. Unlike restaurants that prepare food on-demand from a relatively fixed set of ingredients, chefs of soup-pot restaurants make their decisions about what to cook in a more complex food-society nexus, factoring in their culinary skill, seasonality of ingredients, whims in demand, and the compulsion to touch on the wide spectrum of regional Khmer cuisine. Consequently, as a site of research, these restaurants can be a window on food seasonality, food diversity, and the vagaries of urban dining demands.

CONNECTING RURAL SEASONALITY TO URBAN SPACES

The rural sphere, in all of its regional diversity, has historically acted as a cradle for food culture by both engendering dietary customs and sustaining the flow of agricultural inputs to cities. Food studies have long been concerned with what Appadurai (1986) calls "the social life of things", or the complex, sometimes transnational, forces that accompany a product and re-define its role along the path from producer to consumer. Food (i.e. fresh produce or meat) is an interesting example of this, as its eventual use is understood well by the producers, namely farmers who are cooks and eaters themselves. As agricultural produce moves away from the farm and into the city, its end-use in someone's recipe may either diverge widely from the conceptions of the farmer or fall in line with them. For example, while the fate of a high-quality pumpkin that is bought by the chef of a five-star hotel is hardly imaginable to the farmer, if that pumpkin is bought by a family cook or soup-pot chef, the end-use of cooking it is likely to be very similar to that which would have taken place on the

farm. Beyond a shared view of how to prepare food, the cook in a soup-pot restaurant shares an additional connection with producers, namely seasonality. While growing seasons are not as differentiated in the sub-tropics as in the temperate latitudes, the availability of water and the presence of competing cultivation (typically rice in the humid sub-tropics) engender a combined form of seasonality based on cultural, market, and natural factors. For the purpose of this paper, seasonality describes the cyclical (i.e. foreseeable) changes in both price and availability of certain agriculture and fish during the course of the year.

Typically, soup-pot restaurants face conditions similar to a designated cook in a family home, balancing what is available and cost-competitive (from the fields, rivers, and markets) with nutritional considerations, the family budget, and food preferences. In a predominantly agricultural society like Cambodia, there are many synergies inherent to this process. Seasonal vegetables, fruits, and fish are typically cheaper, fresher, and more in-demand by customers than imported or cold-stored products (AMO and WFP,⁸ 2014, p. 2014; Buoy, Chhuon, & Thilsted, 2009; Chou, 2011, pp. 12–13, 28–29, 58–59; Hap et al., 2012, pp. 32–34). This is illustrated by a restaurant chef's description of her shopping strategy:

I do all the shopping by myself so that I can be sure about quality. I don't trust my children yet, but they come with me so that they can learn. We usually go to the market for vegetables in the evenings, a few times per week. The other days we stay home and prepare pickles and sauces. [HF: And for fish, meat?] Every morning at dawn I wake my husband up, we go for fish and meat and sometimes vegetables if the farmers bring in something very fresh. Sometimes I see a vegetable that reminds me to cook a dish I haven't made in a while. Sometimes I see a fish that is perfect for one soup. I am always thinking about what I made before. I try not to repeat the same foods in a week, but sometimes I have difficulty in the dry season when there is not so much [produce]. I try to cook this way if the price is not too high. (female soup-pot restaurateur, age 42, personal communication, 12. September 2014)

The description above by a veteran (12-year) chef from a popular soup-pot restaurant is indicative of the logic of a typical home food planner. As opposed to the countryside, home cooks and restaurateurs in the city, are not necessarily constrained by the seasonality of produce to the same extent as rural dwellers. Nevertheless, as the vignette above illustrates, and embedded research with other restaurateurs confirms, most soup-pot chefs strive for seasonality, but must balance this against the risk of boring their customers with the same (seasonal) dishes. Interestingly, in a family-run restaurant, they also have to consider the demands within their actual family. A telling quote from the child of a soup-pot restaurant owner echoed this sentiment:

If customers came in early enough, they would see our family eating the same food that we will serve for lunch. If the food is bad, we will complain to dad along with all of the customers! (male school child, age 15, personal communication, 14. June 2014)

8 Agricultural Marketing Office of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishery of Cambodia & the World Food Programme of the United Nations

In order to fulfill the expectations of ‘city people’, soup-pot restaurants face a difficult challenge when attempting to source ingredients in unison with fresh markets, while also balancing food diversity, long-term customer preferences, and price fluctuations. A successful soup-pot restaurateur regularly manages these competing demands and, as a consequence, when urban dwellers dine out at soup-pot restaurants, the food they eat becomes a transparent window into the agricultural and market cycles that they would not otherwise encounter in the city. This comes to light when comparing the food diversity, cost, and use of non-standard vegetables⁹ between soup-pot and to-order restaurants (see Table 3).

Soup-pot restaurant	To-order restaurant
2-pot restaurant	Top 5 dishes
11/28 dishes per week/month	Ordered 49 percent of the time
3-pot restaurant	Top 10 dishes
15/40 dishes per week/month	Ordered 63 percent of the time
Average price: USD 1.55	Average price: USD 1.85
With rice, sometimes dessert	With rice, no dessert
Non-standard vegetables	Non-standard vegetables
39 percent of dishes	23 percent of dishes

Table 3: Comparing the diversity, cost, and vegetable sourcing of restaurant formats (own data).

Although restaurants serving pre-prepared food and those serving made-to-order food cannot be compared on a one-to-one basis, I have found that this creative set of metrics adequately describes the different dynamics in these restaurants. A 2-pot restaurant (i.e. one preparing 2 large soup pots for each meal) will serve, on average, 28 unique soups and stews per month while a 3-pot restaurant will serve 40 per month. These values do not include the pre-prepared fried foods and braised dishes (*kaw*) that are also commonly served as the quantity of these dishes varies greatly across soup-pot restaurants of similar sizes. At the extreme, I have documented a 15-pot restaurant at the Central Market that serves up to 140 identifiably unique dishes per month. In contrast, to-order restaurants tend to receive most of their orders for a limited range of dishes and in only 37 percent of cases do people stray from the top-10 dishes ordered at that restaurant.¹⁰ Furthermore, to-order restaurateurs reported that they are not routinely equipped to serve a large range of food types as this often leads to food waste. This becomes apparent when comparing the use of non-standard vegetables; on average, soup-pot restaurants, serve food containing these more unusual vegetables almost twice as often as to-order restaurants.

The tendency of soup-pot restaurants to use more seasonal ingredients can be

9 Non-standard vegetables excludes the most generic of ingredients found in Cambodia, such as tomatoes, onions, Chinese cabbage, morning glory, lettuce, potatoes, spring onions, string beans, sour mango, bok choy, shallots, and lime. It includes more recipe-specific ingredients such as lotus shoots, banana flower, young bamboo shoots, bitter gourd, *makak* fruit, palm fruit, *ma'om*, moringa, *kantrup*, *bas* leaf, *ptih*, Malabar spinach, *ngob* leaf, water mimosa, Asiatic Pennywort, and Crab Claw herb.

10 Although the top-5 or top-10 dishes are, strictly speaking, not consistent across restaurants, they are still generally comparable because the dishes overlap 70 to 80 percent.

substantiated further by comparing the amount of Cambodia-sourced and/or seasonal ingredients purchased by the two different restaurant formats (see Table 4). While with some products (such as fruit, eggs, beef, and pork) place of origin and seasonality is fairly consistent across the market, with other products (such as vegetables and fish), soup-pot restaurants tend to buy more domestic and seasonal produce than to-order restaurants.¹¹ To-order restaurant owners suggested that, in order to be ready to prepare a range of the highest-demanded dishes, they are compelled to buy a fairly fixed set of ingredients, regardless of whether these are in season or can be sourced locally that day. With the flexibility to select and adjust their offering of dishes on an ad-hoc basis, soup-pot restaurateurs are not faced with this dilemma.

Ingredient	Soup-pot	To-order
Vegetables	73	56
Fruit	85	80
Beef	100	100
Pork	34	31
Wild fish (Dry season)	43	27
Wild fish (Wet season)	78	58
Eggs	85	82

Table 4: Percentage of ingredients (by weight) that are Cambodia-sourced and/or seasonal (own data).

The overarching trend apparent from the data in Tables 3 and 4 is that in addition to serving a more diverse range of food types, soup-pot restaurants demand a more diverse range of ingredients than to-order restaurants. From the perspective of the soup-pot restaurant owner, this is a result of following seasonal trends and fluctuations in fresh food markets and avoiding repetition of the same food. From the perspective of to-order restaurants, the reason most commonly given for the low diversity of food selected is that customers tend to be less creative about what to order when they are given the choice (not to mention that most to-order restaurants lack a menu), requiring to-order restaurateurs to stock certain ingredients regardless of their seasonality or place of origin.

RURAL FAMILIARITY IN URBAN DINING

For city dwellers and the cohort of migrants who move through the cities seasonally, soup-pot restaurants provide low-cost access to familiar types of Khmer food and the comfortable atmosphere of ‘home-cooking’. Particularly for low-income people, these familiar locales are an invaluable resource in overcoming the economic and social challenges of living in (or, in the case of migrants, transitioning to) the city.

11 Place of origin and seasonality was confirmed orally with each handler during market transactions. And while it is unrealistic to expect that food traders always honestly report the origin of the food, their long-term relationships with restaurateurs presents a disincentive to regular lying, so these numbers are reasonably accurate.

According to embedded research in 15 soup-pot restaurants and 9 to-order restaurants, this utility derives from three main attributes of soup-pot restaurants:

1. The atmosphere is familial and less anonymous;
2. Despite the low price point and modest settings, they are a less class-sensitive environment than on-demand restaurants;
3. The way the food is served mimics social eating customs in the countryside.

While the overall experience of eating in a soup-pot restaurant was routinely praised as comfortable and informal by a wide spectrum of patrons, this aspect is more pronouncedly appreciated by rural migrants, who are in the process of adjusting to the relative anonymity and service-orientation in the city. One patron, who had moved to Phnom Penh three months prior, related the following:

After I sold my land and moved to Stung Meanchey [district], I went to a nearby *k'mong* [to-order] restaurant for lunch because we did not have a kitchen ready yet. We just ordered one soup and one fried food, but the waiter brought us a whole receipt! (male soup-pot restaurant patron, age 50, personal communication, 16. July 2014)

The business-like formality of this experience was clearly off-putting and in contrast to the more informal culture of soup-pot restaurants. In fact, this quote derives from an interview in a soup-pot restaurant that took place after the meal was paid for, a process in which the owner's 15-year-old daughter merely asked the patron what he had eaten, calculated in her head, and produced change from her own pocket. The fact that the restaurant owner's children, who were home from school for lunch, were the only 'servers' in the restaurant facilitates the atmosphere of familiarity (a typical family scene can be viewed in Figure 3). For this customer, the 'working class' character of the setting is considered a positive trait, even though he was a middle-class patron who could afford a fancier setting. In fact, sitting near this patron, who was a civil servant, were a range of people from varying socio-economic backgrounds. This included a group of four criminal defense lawyers, a local surgeon and his family, two *achan* (Buddhist laypeople) from the local pagoda, two groups of teenage students, and a group of construction workers in soiled clothing. In my sample of 15 soup-pot restaurants across Phnom Penh, this type of heterogeneity of clientele is consistent across the city (see Figure 2) and, in areas with more mixed middle and upper-class populations, the atmosphere in soup-pot restaurants is distinctively egalitarian.

One reason consistently cited for the inclusive popularity of soup-pot restaurants is the customary way in which the food is selected, presented, and served. The owner typically offers an arrangement of foods that allows even a lone diner to enjoy a complete menu that includes a watery soup, a fried entree, pickles, and cold tea (see a typical spread in Figure 4). In a to-order restaurant setting, arranging a meal balanced in this way would require planning by the customer rather than the chef and a higher cost to the customer. Allowing a food planner to curate the dishes available is a dietary custom that is typical of the countryside (Halwart, 2006; Ip & Betts, 1986; Ooraikul, Sirichote, & Siripongvutikorn, 2008) and has expanded into Cambodian urban cuisine in the soup-pot setting. In fact, customers that I interviewed in soup

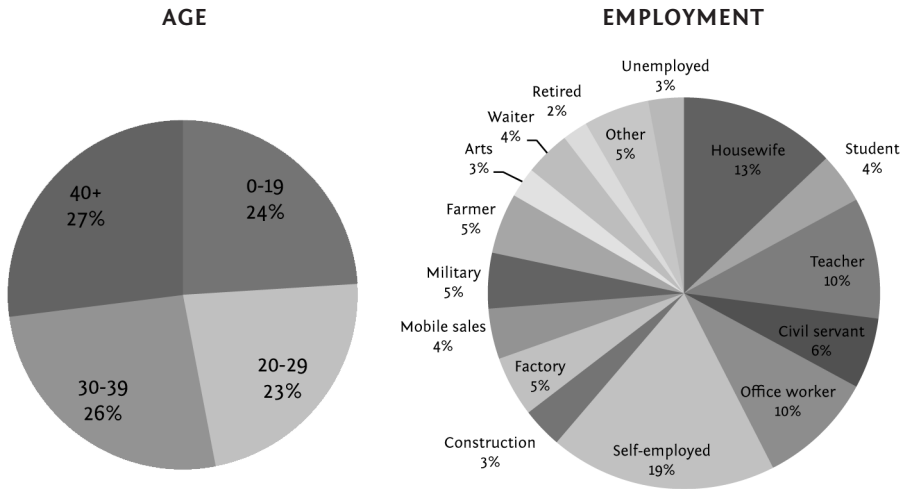


Figure 2: Diners in soup-pot restaurants: Employment and age distribution (own data).



Figure 3: A scene from a family-run soup-pot restaurant in Phnom Penh (photo by Hart N. Feuer).

pot restaurants consistently reported that they expect the chef to arrange the dishes to complement each other in a balanced way that follows dietary customs (and avoids food taboos, such as serving steamed rice without soup to wash it down).



Figure 4: A typical arrangement of Cambodian fare in a soup-pot restaurant (photo by Hart N. Feuer).

RURAL DIETARY LEARNING IN THE CITY

By providing a rotating menu of dishes containing diverse ingredients in a customary modality of dining, soup-pot restaurants can be a mutually-accepted coercive space of dietary learning, providing meals that are culturally understood to be balanced and nutritious, and that constantly (re)expose patrons to the diversity of national cuisine. Indeed, when prepared properly and arranged following various unwritten rules (i.e. old wives tales) for combining food types, Khmer cuisine can readily provide all of the necessary nutrients (Olney et al., 2009) as well as integrate various medicinal foods that support illness prevention (Medecine de la Natur, 2010). This aligns with the characteristics of the soup-pot restaurant outlined in the sections above – as a popular, affordable, and convenient place to eat, an access point to diverse home-cooking, and an egalitarian space for urban residents. Aligned this way, this positive dietary and socialization experience also creates an opportunity for informal learning about the range of Khmer cuisine, eating habits, and food flavors/textures. To illustrate with one vignette:

Of course my child here [age 10] wants to eat burgers, but when we come here [to the soup-pot restaurant] to eat, he is very happy trying new kinds of soup and other foods that I don't make at home. Look at his plate today, he removed all the bones from this fish that he has never tried before. ... Here there is not only cola, but also coconut water and sugar cane juice. (housewife, age 36, personal communication, 11. August 2014)

In this example, the soup-pot restaurant provides a setting for informal food education by providing examples of Khmer cuisine not routinely prepared at home, and

by introducing local agricultural products (e.g. a new fish, alternative sweet drinks, unfamiliar vegetables and flavors) that are found in Khmer cuisine. The practice of providing a space with coercive social rules for dining that features a varied range of dishes is not dissimilar to programs that have been used for teaching nutrition education to Cambodian refugees in the USA (Ip & Betts, 1986), which suggests that the soup-pot restaurant is unwittingly serving as a passive educational resource. The child mentioned in the quote above is learning skills such as how to fillet an unfamiliar fish, how to taste and appreciate new flavors, and how to conduct himself in a customary eating environment. These skills will be useful when visiting relatives in the countryside or being invited to a meal at someone else's house. The mother, in turn, is refreshing her familiarity with certain foods, learning how to match the various soups and fried foods, and possibly learning about new dishes. Indeed, in many of the soup-pot restaurants I observed, it was common for the owner to discuss ingredients, cooking techniques, and food taboos with patrons.

In fact, a striking feature of many discussions that I have overheard or participated in at soup-pot restaurants is the high degree of food-related expertise exhibited by most patrons. In conversation at the table, it is not unusual for a patron to correctly diagnose a cooking error, off-flavor, poor quality ingredient, or the questionable arrangement of dishes. It is also not unusual for patrons to praise the freshness of ingredients, skillful preparation, and suitable arrangement. In general, this capacity to critique food and agriculture is widespread in Cambodia, owing largely to the rural background of most city dwellers. As depicted in Saphan (2011) and Feuer (2011), the re-population of Cambodian cities after the forced ruralization of people during the Democratic Kampuchea period (ending primarily in 1979) has meant that most urban dwellers, and almost all recent urban migrants, have an agricultural background. This tends to equip diners to assess raw ingredients and the food they receive with considerable nuance (see Feuer, 2013, pp. 24–26). However, eating in soup-pot restaurants also presents new challenges and opportunities for patrons to maintain and revise their knowledge and awareness of food quality, nutrition, and food safety.

Dining in a soup-pot restaurant is usually as predictable as eating at home: The food is familiar and the arrangement of the dishes is customary. However, given the diversity of food encountered over time in soup-pot restaurants (see Table 4 for reference) and the variability among venues, one often discovers new foods, or is confronted with modern food ingredients and additives (such as monosodium glutamate, bouillon, synthetic vinegar, artificial colorings, etc.). Because the food at soup-pot restaurants is similar to food that might be served at home, patrons have a baseline from which to comment on the divergences in quality of raw ingredients, skill in preparation, and presence of new ingredients – in both positive and negative ways.

Actually, this is my first time here even though I live just nearby. I used to eat there [pointing across the street] every day, but the daughter took over cooking and the food is no longer tasty. She uses a lot of flavoring [monosodium glutamate] and prepares the *kreung* [pounded ingredient paste] the night before so it is not good smelling by the next day. (female garment factory worker, age 19, personal communication, 17. August 2014)

Taste this rice. I guess this is IR [a high-yielding variety]. This is for pigs to eat. We should be proud of our rice in Cambodia. ... I'm not coming here again. (male security guard and former rice farmer, age 25, personal communication, 21. March 2014)

[To me:] If you look behind this house, you'll see banana trees, herbs, and *b'ah* trees. You're not supposed to put *b'ah* leaves in this soup, but that's why it's so tasty even if it's not really *somlaw korko* [vegetable herbal stew]. [To the hostess:] Hey sister, show this foreigner how fresh your ingredients are – bring him some fresh *sluk m'reah* from the back! (male construction worker, age 34, personal communication, 14. September 2014)

In aggregate, these routine types of critique are performative of food knowledge: They represent both the continual confirmation and maintenance of existing knowledge and the potential for new learning about food, agriculture, and contemporary issues such as food additives. At the bare minimum, soup-pot restaurants provide a continual reminder of the variation of regional food and, particularly for children, provide opportunity to discover flavors, textures, and social eating patterns not found at home. In other words, soup-pot restaurants help set the popular and accessible benchmark for national cuisine and contribute to maintaining existing knowledge. In addition, new learning and participation in the evolution of the national cuisine takes place spontaneously when one encounters and learns from new dishes, novel variations on familiar foods, and modern ingredients.

ENTREPRENEURS ADAPTING CULINARY TRADITION TO THE CITY

From one perspective, the cohort of small business owners who open and maintain soup-pot restaurants can be viewed as conservative, un-original, and practicing only rudimentary hygiene. Indeed, their food is not usually innovative in the sense of creativity and experimentation, their premises are typically unkempt and poorly furnished, and they often follow poorly-substantiated folk models of hygiene (see Pelto & Pelto, 1997) rather than scientific rationale. In this paper, however, I have argued that soup-pot restaurateurs operate in a rural-urban nexus, in which their role as brokers for rural dietary customs and curators of national cuisine is valued more than their capacity for innovation and fancy interiors. In fact, many business owners have related that they fear that certain types of advancement will only alienate customers or increase costs without justification.

Two years ago, I updated my restaurant with a new display case and silverware. My wife and I thought it was a good change, but customers complained. They said they could not look inside the soups or touch the fish easily to help them choose. And they said the new spoons were too thick so they could not cut meat with them. So I put the soups back where the flies were and gave them the small aluminum spoons back. You see, that is what I have now.¹² (male soup-pot restaurateur, age 39, personal communication, 27. March 2014)

12 It is common in Cambodian *haan bai* not to provide knives, so diners have adapted to using the edge of a spoon to cut through large pieces of meat. Cheaper spoons are often thinner, which makes them more effective.

I always buy my rice from neighbors in my home village in Kompong Cham. This is usually one or two traditional rice varieties. Last year, a salesman convinced me to try a high-quality jasmine rice so I bought two sacks to try. Some people complained that the rice was too soft for everyday food, or they said they feel like they are eating wedding food. After using that rice for one month, I switched back to the old one. (female soup-pot restaurateur, age 45, personal communication, 15. March 2014)

The only reason that I can accept for the lunch price to go up is if the owner gives more food or makes better quality food. I don't want to pay more for fancy tables, chairs, and bowls. (male soup-pot patron, age 55, personal communication, 14. February 2014)

The examples above suggest that the constraints faced by soup-pot restaurateurs in deciding how to manage expectations about their establishment compel a more functional form of creativity, one which does not tamper overtly with the perceived authenticity of the customary dining experience. This follows with analyses of the role of chef-as-entrepreneur, which suggest that the responsibilities of a chef are not necessarily to innovate and upgrade but to match the food to the intended dining experience (Duruz, 2009; Leschziner, 2009). Indeed, the restaurateurs of many of the more popular soup-pot restaurants that I met had learned the art of creating what Moreiras's (1999) called a "double consciousness". This phenomenon explains how restaurants keep the interactional framework of dining familiar and desirable to patrons even as they are otherwise compelled to adjust the underlying structure to respond to urban constraints (e.g. hygiene, entertainment, availability of seasonal or local ingredients, presence of non-Khmer food). "Double consciousness" describes how, for example, hygiene measures are surreptitiously included in the restaurant protocol without tampering with the shabby, working-class atmosphere. This also explains how, given the growing prevalence of aquaculture fish and the vegetable imports to Cambodia (Chan, 2014; Chhean, Diep, & Moustier, 2004; Hortle, 2007, p. 59), a restaurateur can create a dining experience that expresses 'authentic' flavors while camouflaging the presence of cultured catfish and out-of-season vegetables.

For example, most establishments I researched now provide fans for comfort, condiment kits and rubbish bins for each table, and an area with a television or newspapers. All of them will package the food to take-away with no extra fee. More than half of the venues (18 of 24) use food warmers to maintain optimal temperature (see the pots in Figure 1). Additionally, most restaurants have switched to hygienic ice and have improved techniques for sterilizing dishes and utensils. Even then, some establishments still crush the hygienic cubes to make the ice appear like 'traditional' shaved block ice, and present the already-sterilized utensils in a jar of hot water (an accepted folk method of hygiene). A few venues (3 out of 24) use cleaning agents to wipe down tables instead of the more predominant practice of wiping with a used rag (a folk model more effective in maintaining orderliness rather than sterility).

While hygiene and comfort can be easily adjusted without changing the overall rural dining experience, the mark of a good broker is the capacity of the owner to transform the seasonal products in the market into food that captures a broad swath of the national cuisine. One soup-pot restaurant near the Central Market in Phnom Penh has remained a beloved institution due to this characteristic, often be-

ing referred to in the newspapers as “a museum of lowland Cambodian food” (“The Unique Lunch”, 2012). Ultimately, the proprietor who can derive a large number of dishes from the highest quality ingredients will not only be a successful entrepreneur, but also provide a gateway for city people to routinely encounter diverse rural food, thereby (re-)producing the national cuisine and maintaining demand for domestic agriculture.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I argue that the rural-urban interface is the crucible in which the diversity of rural agriculture and culinary culture is transformed into a more abstract and less geographically-embedded concept of ‘national cuisine’. While many observers of culinary change are quick to jump to globalization as both the major cause for and the conclusion of national cuisine, the case of Cambodia in this paper suggests that such an approach would be premature. In Cambodia, and potentially other rural-dominated countries, the more fundamental processes of agrarian change and urbanization are the primary battlegrounds in the formative stages of ‘developing’ national cuisine. During this period, national cuisine is still predominantly about defining the range of foods that will become generally known, qualitatively understood, and regularly consumed by urban people of a discrete culinary-ethnic group. Undoubtedly, for the purposes of encouraging culinary tourism, the urgency builds to establish cuisine as a representation of an imagined community of the nation (Ferguson, 2010; Phillips, 2006). However, this does not necessarily crowd out the concurrent, and more everyday, processes of consolidating culinary diversity at the rural-urban nexus. This ‘glare of the global’, I suggest, is what brought Appadurai (1988) to hastily suggest that national cuisine would tend to be formed out of disparate regional and local elements that scarcely would have been found together. In fact, cuisines from nearby rural areas or even those gradually integrated through immigration and agricultural exchange ‘from outside’ (as would be the case for certain Thai, Vietnamese, and Chinese touches in Cambodia), are often found together with little contradiction as long as basic ingredients and cooking practices do not depart too radically from one another. This is illustrated in this paper through the decentralized manner by which soup-pot restaurants, as brokers of cuisine and agricultural produce, routinely curate the diversity of regional culinary habits and fresh produce – regardless of whether or not they come from Cambodia.

While there are cuisines that, in a simplified and reified form, aspire to go abroad as ambassadors of culture (see the cases of Singaporean “Takeout” and “Malaysian Kitchen” found in, respectively, Epicure, 2011 and Yoshino, 2009), this paper is about the early formative steps, in which culinary diversity, agricultural heritage, and everyday eating habits are more fundamental than “culinary soft power” (Farrer, 2009) in the world. As translators of rural dietary traditions for urban citizens and urban migrants, Cambodian soup-pot restaurants contribute to maintaining awareness and appreciation for Khmer cuisine and supporting seasonal domestic agriculture. As the most popular destination for meals out across the socio-economic spectrum, soup-pot restaurants can contribute to food sovereignty by providing affordable, accessible, and nutritionally balanced food for a broad range of urban diners. In the long

term, this domestic consolidation of national cuisine reinforces the stature of Khmer food and puts it in an advantageous position for exposure to global cuisines. This has become more apparent in 2014 with the naming of Cambodia's Luu Meng as "Asia's Top Chef" by Top 10 of Asia magazine (Murray, 2014) and in Cambodia's third consecutive win of the title for the world's "Best Rice" at the 2014 World Rice Conference.

Everyday institutions, such as soup-pot restaurants, facilitate food sovereignty locally by brokering diversity and consolidating national cuisine in an inclusive, decentralized way. This then contributes to laying the groundwork for international legitimation of Khmer cuisine. These forms of food sovereignty are rooted in daily practices and are essentially democratic as opposed to the sometimes authoritarian policies implemented under a food sovereignty heading.

This inclusivity and democratic nature of assembling national cuisine is achieved, in part, due to three emergent characteristics of soup-pot restaurants that were outlined above. First, by leveraging synergies between fresh and low-cost ingredients from domestic agriculture, soup-pot restaurants render seasonality transparent to patrons who otherwise do not experience the agricultural cycles in the city, thereby empowering everyday citizens to participate in demand creation. Second, the social atmosphere of soup-pot restaurants is a more familial and egalitarian environment than other types of venues, thereby drawing customers from the entire socio-economic continuum who are seeking familiar culinary customs. Third, soup-pot restaurants can be a space of dietary learning, providing meals that are not only balanced and nutritious, but allow city dwellers, especially children, to experience and learn about the diversity of national cuisine while participating in its continual redefinition.

For food researchers looking for countervailing forces to the rapid changes in agriculture, cuisine, and diets in developing countries, the soup-pot restaurant can be understood as an institution that transforms culinary diversity into a relevant and popular experience. As a phenomenon on the rural-urban interface, soup-pot restaurants are neither entirely rural nor entirely urban. Rather they erect a "double consciousness" that allows urbanites to experience a window onto rural cuisine and agricultural cycles while adjusting for comfort and the vagaries of food availability in urban markets. Successfully navigating the expectations of urban Cambodian customers requires the soup-pot restaurateurs to carefully gauge the competing demands for modern convenience, a customary experience, as well as tasty and varied food. In this way, the relative survival of soup-pot establishments can be an indicator of the scope and nature of industrialization and their role in brokering will provide insights and guidance for managing future disjuncture of globalization and agrarian change on food.



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