

AN APPRECIATION FOR INDIAN CUISINE AMONG BANGKOKIANS AND FOREIGN TOURISTS IN BANGKOK: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: *The aim of this research is to study the degree of appreciation for Indian cuisines among Bangkokians and Foreign Tourists in Bangkok. It is based on a survey of 13 famous Indian Restaurants in Bangkok. The research, conducted in July and August, 2012, looks at restaurant service in terms of ambience, taste, quality & hygiene, price and service staff, with taste and quality & hygiene being the two important aspects. Both descriptive and inferential research was used in this study. 260 questionnaires were collected. The reliability value of all the variables was more than 0.6. The findings show that the degree of appreciation by consumers varies with the demographic factor considered (nationality, gender, age, marital status, income, and education).*

Keywords: *cuisine, Indian restaurants, ambience, taste, quality, hygiene, SERVQUAL.*

1. Introduction

Food tourism, going places out of a strong interest in food and drinks, motivates people to travel (Wolf, 2002). Food lovers always look for unique and different dining experiences during their travel or visit to restaurants (Richards, 2002). Tourists visiting destinations for reasons other than food may also end up having memorable dining experiences. Food may thus provide opportunities for tourism destinations to double up as food destinations. One country with such potential is Thailand.

Tourism in Thailand is critical to its economy. It is the backbone of its growth and one of the fastest growing industries. The tourism industry accounts for 6.5 % of the country's GDP. According to official statistics, in 2011, Thailand received 20 million visitors, this in spite of the flooding which affected major portions of northern, central region and Bangkok itself (Thailand: Tourist arrivals from 1998 till 2011. Quarter 2007-2011).

Bangkok has grown rapidly as a focal tourism center and is also becoming a food destination in Asia for tourists visiting Thailand. They can obviously try local food. They can also try a whole array of

international cuisines. Among the many cuisines available in Bangkok, Indian cuisine has a special place as it has played a major role in the popularity of the Indian Restaurants in Bangkok. The distinct and unique flavor and aroma of Indian food have been some of the main reasons for the liking and spreading of Indian restaurants in Bangkok.

In some measure, Indian food has also been underrated and has not received all the attention it deserves, mostly because of some low-quality, unauthentic Indian restaurants that have given a bad name to the cuisine. Though calling themselves Indian restaurants, they serve oily food. The fact is Good Indian food is not spicy or oily but it is well balanced with different kinds of spices like Cardamom, Ginger, Turmeric, Cumin etc, which have tremendous health benefits.

Indian Cuisine, however, has recently been gaining worldwide recognition. In London, Chicken Tikka Masala has become a signature dish in some restaurants and is very popular among British. It has also been rated among the top seven world's best cuisines. Indian food and Restaurants are creating a buzz all over the world. Indian restaurants are known for offering fine dining that suits one's taste buds. A number of entrepreneurs have also been creating a great buzz with Indian meals available at

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supermarkets, making Indian food popular globally and pointing to the huge potential of the processed food industry. However, due a poor food supply chain, Indians are used to fresh food, which means that processed Indian food may have a brighter future outside the country as exemplified by the success it has encountered at UK and US supermarkets, not surprising given the large number of Indian population living in those countries.

Tastes and smells are an integral part of any cuisine. They also provide information about the food. Since many Indian restaurants offer buffets, consumers can be introduced to different tastes from different regions of India, each one having a different kind of cuisine (spicy, mild spicy, sweet). Indian cuisine is versatile.

Indian food has been in existence for several centuries standing as a symbol of Indian culture and history. Its flavors are unmatched. The popularity of Indian restaurants has grown over the years, because of its fine blending of exotic spices and incorporation of vegetables and meat. But Indian restaurants are not simply known for their delicacies. They are also known for their ambience; the decor, music, and service. A true Indian restaurant must exude the warmth and hospitality of the staff. It will also always play soothing Indian music to complement the Indian cuisine. And since India is known for its hospitality and generosity, a pleasing welcome smile on the face of the staff always makes diners feel valuable.

Price of course has a direct influence on the restaurant business. Customers not just paying for the food but also for the whole operation which includes staff payment, electricity bill, marketing, cooks etc. In most cases, prices are carefully set up to be reasonable or competitive in the market, so to generate positive word of mouth publicity.

Quality and hygiene are a tricky combination which can makes restaurants popular or unsuccessful. So can the quality of the service and the staff, both of the

utmost importance. No matter how good the food is, if the service is bad, the restaurants will soon acquire a bad reputation.

After reviewing the relevant literature and considering the theoretical and conceptual frameworks as well as the descriptive analyses, the degree of appreciation of Indian cuisine and Indian restaurants and the key factors influencing consumers' perception will be discussed. Some recommendations will then be made.

2. Literature Review

- Food Tourism

Food tourism can be defined as a visit or a trip that is motivated by an interest in food and beverages (Wolf, 2002). The motivation that leads people to travel creates lasting experience in their lives Food lovers always look for unique and different experiences in dinning during their travel (Richards,2002). Food Tourism has also been growing thanks to food related products, through literature on food and travel, travel packages, and offers and discounts on food. Those contribute to food experiences becoming an essential part of food tourism.

- Appreciation and Satisfaction

Appreciation is a positive emotion that happens when there is an acknowledgement of a benefit (Schewe, 2003). Appreciation takes place when we experience something pleasurable in our lives such as good food, good ambience, good service etc. It is an optimistic and confident emotion or attitude to recognize or value something in our lives (Ari, 2012). Appreciation towards good food always will lead to write a good experience on the blog, good reviews) and good articles (thoughts and feelings), something which always attract readers' attention as first-hand experience is highly valued. This because we live in a culture of positive appreciation and tell-it-all, <http://www.specialtyfood.com/news-trends/featured-articles/retail-operations/a-culture-of-positive-appreciation>.

- *Nationality and Consumer Behavior*

It is the identity of a person, which basically refers to the citizenship an individual has and to the fact that he/she belongs to a particular community of "nationals." It can have a major impact on marketing and consumer behavior as it can influence an individual's consumer culture and buying pattern. Culture has an effect on the consumption process. Levy and Grewal (2007) defined culture as the shared morals, beliefs, customs, and values of a group of people. Culture affects what, why, how, where, and when people buy. Peoples' nationalities determine their country cultures, which engenders visible nuances such as artifacts, behavior, dress, ceremonies, language differences, colors and tastes, and food preferences (Levy and Grewal, 2007).

- *Age and Consumer Behavior*

Consumer age is linked with marketing opportunities, consumer behavior, and market segmentation (Noble and Schewe, 2000). According to a survey conducted in 2000 by Jones, the median age of US consumers was 32.9 in 1990 and 35.3 in 2000. In America adults (18+) made up more than 74% of the overall population, and the growing market segment is seniors who have significant buying power. The younger adults group (20-34 years) is shrinking. Consumer behaviors vary among people with different age, such as Baby boomers (1946-1964), generation X (1965-1976), and generation Y (born after 1976). Younger generations have varied interests, start becoming independent at an early age, are very keen on buying new, innovative things, and are looking for fun, adventure and exciting things. On the other hand, the older generations are looking more for lasting and reliable benefits derived from things. It is also seen that people are often influenced by events such as wars, political upheaval, economic crises, especially when they happened in one's early adulthood and late adolescence. William and Darin (2009)

also found a strong relationship between the family life cycle, service performance, justice perceptions, and culture as they act as moderators. Using data from 717 respondents from central and Eastern Europe, they determined that consumers at different stages of their lives will not have similar consumption patterns.

Attitude in the service consumption influences consumer's expectations. There are cultural expectations of fairness in the performance of service.

- *Education Level and Consumer Behavior*

Education often determines social classes, which in turn create certain ideologies, perception and beliefs in their lives. It influences people's social status. Education also has an impact on people's consumption skills. It makes consumers more aware of their consumer rights, product quality, and standards (Xuemin and Xining, 2006).

- *Income and Consumer Behavior*

In developing countries, social class distribution is often described as a triangular shape (Raju, 1995). Take Thailand for example. The lower class constitutes the largest group with the middle class forming somehow a smaller group and a very small upper class cluster standing at the top of the pyramid. In Thailand, the majority of upper class consists of Thai-Chinese (Thai people of Chinese descents), in a much higher proportion than in any other country in the area save for Singapore. Their approach, likings and preferences is bound to influence the marketing approach for International Cuisine in Thailand. Research conducted in China by Kuo and Fred (2009) shows that the relationship between food demand and food quality, income level and nutrients is high. The quantity of food consumed by Chinese is also highly influenced by their income growth.

- *Service Quality SERVQUAL*

Customer satisfaction and service quality are the two key elements. They

involve consumers' perception and expectations. Admittedly, high quality service contributes to the growth and profitability of a restaurant. But how is the service quality measured so that it can be maintained and/or improve? The service quality gap can be examined by comparing consumers' expectations and their actual perceptions. Service quality and customer satisfaction are the crucial factors determines how successful the organization will be in maintaining the consumer relationships (Reichheld, 1996).

3. Conceptual Framework and Methodology

The conceptual framework is based David and Susan's (2001) , Clare and Pater's (2005), and Hong and Victor's (2009) models. The independent variables are nationality, gender, age, income, and education level. Ambience, taste, quality, price and service staff are the dependant variables. Each dependant variable includes sub-variables: ambience consists of atmosphere, music, Indian culture; taste of spices, and a variety of menus for healthy food; quality and hygiene of standard and good, healthy and flavored food; price of of reasonably priced and value for money; and service staff consist of public relations, captain, attendants and waiter and waitresses.

This research seeks to determine the differences among people with different demographic and social characteristics about their appreciation of Indian cuisine among a variety of international cuisines. Thirty hypotheses were developed as a result (see Annex Two).

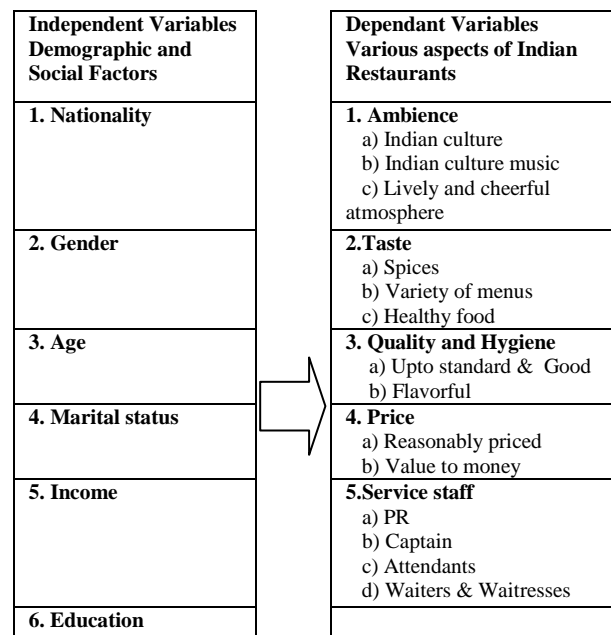
Questionnaires were used as a research instrument and designed based on the conceptual framework so as to gather the relevant information for the dependant and independent variables. It was developed in two parts.

- *Part 1* - Screening Questions: The first question asked whether the respondent has had experience dining at an Indian restaurant or if it was his/her first visit.

The other questions pertain to age and their willingness to answer.

- *Part 2* - *Independent Variables*: It consists of the demographic profile and characteristics of the respondents (nationality, gender, age, marital status, income, education). There are four age groups to choose from as per the respondents' age and four choices of Income.

Figure 1 – Conceptual Framework



Source: Developed by this author for this study

- *Part 3* - *Dependent Variables*: This section includes statements related to five dependant variables and their sub-items (ambience, taste, quality and hygiene, price and service staff). The rating scale consists of statements that express either an appreciation or some degree of appreciation of Indian restaurants.

4. Research Findings

The data collected from 260 respondents show that 198 of them are Non-Thai (expatriates and tourists), representing 75.9% of the total number of people surveyed. Male respondents outnumber female respondents with 64.4% of the total number of respondents. 34.5% of the respondents are between 31-40 years

old; most are married, 55.6 % of them, 55.2% have an income of more than 30,000 Baht; and 44.4 % hold a Bachelor degree.

As Table 1 below shows, the mean scores of Quality and Hygiene are the highest with 3.92 and 3.92 respectively. This means that these 2 aspects have the highest item in terms of appreciation and the most important aspect of Indian Restaurants in Bangkok.

Table 1 - Means of Top 3 Restaurants

	Mean	Range of Mean	Level of Importance
Ambience	3.62	3.41-4.20	Important
Taste	3.92	3.41-4.20	Important
Quality & Hygiene	3.92	3.41-4.20	Important
Price	3.79	3.41-4.20	Important
Service Staff	3.89	3.41-4.20	Important

The Top 3 Indian restaurants overall means are Indian Host with 4.54, Dosa King North and South Indian Restaurant with 4.51 and Himali Cha Cha with 4.39. In addition to having taste and quality and hygiene, other important aspects of these restaurants that contribute to their success is that they are well supported by service staff. The statement 'The restaurant is well appreciated as an Indian Host' has acquired the highest mean score with 4.73 and makes it the number one restaurant. Then comes the Dosa King North and South Indian Restaurant which acquired the second top position with 4.53 and 4.55 for taste and quality and hygiene and is also well supported by the Service staff with a mean score for 4.64. The third top restaurant is Himali Cha Cha, which nevertheless scored the highest mean for taste and quality and hygiene but is lower in terms of service staff with a mean score of 4.31 among restaurants but still manage to be one of the top three restaurants.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this research is to determine the level of appreciation for

Indian cuisines among Bangkokians and foreign tourists patronizing selected Indian restaurants in Bangkok. It is also to determine whether demographics and social characteristics have an influence towards the appreciation of Indian cuisine.

The most important aspects of Indian cuisines has been found to be taste and quality and hygiene, which scored the highest means in the analysis. These criteria especially apply to three top restaurants. Bangkokians have a high appreciation for Indian cuisines due to its spices and taste. It is also because it is a cosmopolitan place that is flooded with Tourists and has a large expatriate community (estimated to be around 80,000). Both factors have contributed to building the reputation of Bangkok as a destination spot for food lovers.

The findings can be summed up as follows: 3 of the top restaurants in Bangkok are among the 13 Indian Restaurants selected for this study. They also happen to be the favorite Indian restaurants among the respondents due largely to what they regard as the two most important aspects of a restaurant, the taste of the food, and its quality and hygiene, as well as the quality and hygiene of the place itself.

Price of course is an important factor. However, the differences among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants on the basis of price are largely based on nationality, gender, and as expected, income. European expatriates and tourists are the least price-minded. Marital status is also a factor, as single people or young couples without children tend to be less mindful of prices.

- Recommendations

Further steps could be taken to enhance the appreciation of Indian Food in Bangkok. First, those restaurants not in the top three could improve the ambience, taste, quality and hygiene, price and service staff so that they could equally compete with the leading restaurants and draw a larger clientele, especially local

one. There should be a perfect harmony and coordination between the decor of the restaurant and the sitting arrangements. The décor should be such that it should be pleasing and soft to the eyes. The music could be kept strictly traditional as people could come to enjoy the menu and the slow traditional music would set the mood in the restaurant. Music allows consumers to indulge in the whole dining experience. A good ambiance wins the heart and goes deep into the consumers' mind as a lasting experience and generates positive word of mouth publicity. It draws new consumers along with loyal ones.

Another recommendation for these restaurants is that simple cooking with good quality ingredients will go a long way in maintaining their reputation. Even though some respondents prefer more elaborated food, the majority of them like genuine simple Indian food. Obviously, good taste always helps to win the loyalty of consumers and bring new ones. Another important point in terms of taste is that chefs at these restaurants should adjust the level of spices to their international patrons without compromising with the quality of the ingredients and dishes.

The restaurant staff should be trained to serve the quality food at a specific temperature. A lot of attention needs to be paid on weekends or rush hours as the quality and hygiene standards are generally compromised then.

Some of the restaurants should concentrate on pricing strategies so that consumers should not find food items very expensive and should not end up feeling they paid more than they planned to and did not get value for their money. Pricing should be such that consumers should be satisfied with the dining experience feel like coming back recommend it to others.

Efforts should be made to have a good service staff as it is an important part of offering a fine dining experience. Consumers want to have fun eating out with plenty of time to interact with dining companions. The service staff needs to be

attentive and should read the consumer's mind for what they need and when do they want it. Timing is everything. Waiters and waitresses should not appear to be hustling and bustling even though the restaurant may be busy during rush hours. They should always try to provide quality service. Another important point is that they should know the menu of the day. Being unaware of what is available on the menu does not look good. They should also make recommendations to customers. Finally, being in the service industry, the service staff needs to be understanding, attentive, humble and cooperative all the time.

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Annex One

Table 3 - Means of Top 3 Restaurants.

Variables/Important Aspect of Indian Restaurants	Top 3 Three Restaurants in Bangkok		
	1.Indian Host	2.Dosa King Rest..	3.Himali ChaCha
Ambience	4.32	4.35	4.00
Taste	4.47	4.53	4.63
Quality & Hygiene	4.55	4.55	4.65
Price	4.32	4.40	4.48
Service Staff	4.73	4.64	4.31
Mean	4.54	4.51	4.39

Annex Two

Table 5 - Summary of Statistical Tools used in testing the Hypothesis

Null Hypothesis	Null Hypothesis description	Statistical Technique Used
H1o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding ambience when classified by nationality.	ANOVA
H2o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding ambience when classified by gender.	Independent T-test
H3o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding ambience when classified by age.	ANOVA
H4o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding ambience when classified by marital status.	ANOVA
H5o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding ambience when classified by income.	ANOVA
H6o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding ambience when classified by education.	ANOVA
H7o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding taste when classified by nationality.	ANOVA
H8o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding taste when classified by gender.	Independent T-test
H9o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding taste when classified by age.	ANOVA
H10o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding taste when classified by marital status.	ANOVA
H11o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding taste when classified by income.	ANOVA
H12o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding taste when classified by education.	ANOVA
H13o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding Quality and Quality and Hygiene when classified by nationality.	ANOVA

Null Hypothesis	Null Hypothesis description	Statistical Technique Used
H14o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding Quality and Quality and Hygiene when classified by gender.	Independent T-test
H15o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding Quality and Quality and Hygiene when classified by age.	ANOVA
H16o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding Quality and Quality and Hygiene when classified by marital status.	ANOVA
H17o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding Quality and Quality and Hygiene when classified by income.	ANOVA
H18o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding Quality and Quality and Hygiene when classified by education.	ANOVA
H19o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding price when classified by nationality.	ANOVA
H20o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding price when classified by gender.	Independent T-test
H21o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding price when classified by age.	ANOVA
H22o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding Quality and Quality and Hygiene when classified by marital status.	ANOVA
H23o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding price when classified by income.	ANOVA
H24o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding price when classified by education.	ANOVA
H25o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding Service staff when classified by nationality.	ANOVA
H26o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding Service staff when classified by gender.	Independent T-test
H27o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding Service staff when classified by age.	ANOVA
H28o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding Service staff when classified by marital status.	ANOVA
H29o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding Service staff when classified by income.	ANOVA
H30o	There is no difference among respondents in their appreciation for Indian restaurants regarding Service staff when classified by education.	ANOVA