

## การพัฒนาเรื่องราวของแกงไทยในฐานะสัญลักษณ์ของ 'วิถีไทย' Developing the Story of Thai Curry as an Icon of the 'Thai Way of Life'

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### บทคัดย่อ

แกงไทยเป็นมากกว่าอาหารเนื่องจากเป็นภาพสะท้อนวิถีชีวิตแบบไทยอย่างลึกซึ้งซึ่งหล่อรวมความอบอุ่นการแบ่งปันและภูมิปัญญาท้องถิ่นเชิงสร้างสรรค์ที่สืบทอดกันมาหลายชั่วอายุคน บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่ออนุรักษ์และส่งเสริมแกงไทยโดยมุ่งเผยแพร่ผ่านอัตลักษณ์แห่งมรดกทางวัฒนธรรมอาหารไทยซึ่งถือเป็น“ซอฟต์พาวเวอร์”ที่สำคัญของชาติสร้างชื่อเสียงในระดับโลกและเป็นที่รู้จักอย่างกว้างขวางทั่วโลก แกงไทยกำลังเผยแพร่ภาระวิถีจากกระแสร์แวนธรรมที่ผสมผสานกันอย่างรวดเร็วรวมถึงพุทธิกรรมการบริโภคที่เปลี่ยนแปลงไปทำให้แกงไทยเปลี่ยนจากสูตรดั้งเดิมกล้ายเป็นเมนูพิเศษสมัยใหม่ อย่างไรก็ตามการเปลี่ยนแปลงดังกล่าวอาจเป็นทั้ง“ความท้าทาย”และ“โอกาส”ในการยกกระดับแกงไทยสู่ระดับสากล ผ่านการออกแบบ“ประสบการณ์การท่องเที่ยวเชิงอาหาร” (Culinary Tourist Experience) ที่สร้างอัตลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมร่วมกับเศรษฐกิจการท่องเที่ยวอย่างยั่งยืน บทความนี้จึงนำเสนอเรื่องราวของที่มาวัฒนธรรมแกงไทยดังต่อไปนี้ ตั้งแต่ต้นถึงปัจจุบัน เพื่อให้สามารถใช้เป็นเครื่องมือในการส่งเสริมวัฒนธรรมดังกล่าวได้อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ ข้อเสนอแนะของการศึกษาเน้นให้มีการร่วบรวมและวิจัยข้อมูลเชิงระบบ เพื่อพัฒนาฐานข้อมูลสูตรแกงไทยดังเดิมและสูตรร่วมสมัยรวมถึงแนวทางการสืบทอดอย่างสร้างสรรค์ในอนาคต

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### ABSTRACT

Thai curry is more than just food because it is a profound reflection of the Thai way of life, encompassing warmth, sharing, and creative local wisdom passing down for many generations.

In this article, the researchers conserve and promote Thai curry with the focus on the distribution through the identity of the cultural heritage of Thai food, an important “soft power” of the country. It is world-renowned at a national and international level. Currently, Thai curry is facing

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a crisis from the speedy mixed cultural streams as well as a changing consumption behavior. Thai curry therefore has changed its original formula to become a modern fusion menu. However, such change may bring both “challenges” and “opportunities” in raising the level of Thai curry to be at an international level through the design of “culinary tourist experiences”, creating a cultural identity together with a sustainable tourism economy.

This article presents the historical background of the Thai curry culture from the past to the present in order to be used as an instrument to promote such culture in an efficient manner. The recommendations from the study are that the focus should be on systematic documentation and research in order to develop a database for the original and contemporary Thai curry recipes together with guidelines for a creative inheritance in the future.

**Keywords:** Cultural Identity, Evolution, History, Thai Curry, Thai Way of Life

## Introduction

The English word “Culture” is derived from the Latin word “Cultura”, which means cultivation and nurturing to grow and flourish. It was originally used for groups of farmers in Europe. Later, it was applied to the development of various aspects of human life (Department of Fine Arts, 1999, p. 37). In Thai, Major General Prince Narathipphongpraphan mentioned that the term “culture” was developed by combining a Pali word with a Sanskrit word, “Watthana”, which comes from the Pali word “Watthana” meaning growth and “dhamma”, which comes from the Sanskrit word “dhamma” meaning the actual state of things. When combined, they indicate a condition of development or discipline. However, it can be summarized that “Culture” is something that humans create for the development of the community's way of life. It has been passed down across the generations, such as games, performances, singing, and food.

While numerous studies have examined Thai cuisine as a part of cultural heritage, few have specifically explored Thai curry as a narrative medium that reflects and communicates the Thai way of life. This academic gap highlights the need to reinterpret Thai curry beyond its gastronomic aspects as a symbol of cultural identity, creativity, and a living heritage adaptable to globalization. Thai curry stands out as a prominent dish that immediately comes to mind when thinking of Thailand. It not only holds a strong influence on tourism in Thailand but also reflects the essence of Thai herbs, offering a harmonious blend of spicy flavors and vibrant colors. This unique combination appeals to both locals and visitors, with popular variations like Green curry, Massaman curry, Hang lay curry, Ho curry, Yellow curry, Khae curry, Om curry, Pra curry, Roasted duck curry, Buan curry and so on. Moreover, Thai curry showcases regional diversity stemming from Thailand's varied geography, rich cultural heritage, and local culinary expertise in adapting to international influences. Throughout its history, Thailand has embraced diverse cultures and

cuisines, incorporating elements like Chinese spices and Western culinary traditions from countries like France, Portugal, and Holland. This cultural fusion, crafted in a traditional Thai style, has earned Thai curry global recognition. For instance, according to the TasteAtlas World Food Ranking 2022, several Thai curries—particularly Massaman Curry and Green Curry—were ranked among the top 100 most delicious local dishes worldwide (TasteAtlas, 2022). This recognition reinforces Thailand's reputation as a "culinary paradise" and demonstrates how Thai curry functions as a soft power tool that supports national branding and tourism.

The wisdom of Thai cuisine comes from learning how to combine the identity of raw materials that naturally exist in each area to develop, add value, and interest to a menu by applying various methods to make it stand out in terms of the smell of local herbs and reflect the identity of the raw materials. But not only this, it includes the incorporation of the culture and way of life of local people into Thai curry dishes. Despite the growing global popularity of Thai cuisine, academic research focusing on Thai curry as a storytelling mechanism within cultural tourism and destination competitiveness remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to bridge that gap by analyzing Thai curry narratives through historical, regional, and intercultural dimensions. The purpose is not only to preserve culinary heritage but also to reinterpret Thai curry as a cultural and economic instrument that connects food, identity, and experience. This research thus contributes to a broader academic understanding of Thai gastronomy as an evolving form of "soft power", capable of shaping international perceptions and promoting Thailand's cultural identity through culinary tourism and creative experiences.

#### **Evolution of Thai curry (Sukhothai/Ayutthaya/Thonburi/Rattanakosin/Modern)**

Thai curry is a quintessential element of Thai cuisine, reflecting the historical and cultural evolution of Thailand. Its development has been shaped by blending local traditions and external influences over centuries. Thai curry has a long history, from the Sukhothai period to the current Rattanakosin era (1782 to the present): The common characteristic of this kind of food is the use of chili paste, which consists of chili, shrimp paste, and other curry pastes. Historically, the evolution of Thai curry demonstrates a continuous adaptation of local wisdom to external cultural influences, symbolizing not only culinary creativity but also Thailand's openness to international exchange. Thai curry originated in the early 13th century CE, during the Sukhothai era. The first impacts were from Indian cuisine, particularly through trade routes that introduced spices such as turmeric, coriander, and cumin (Lalit Maha, 2010). The Indian culinary impact was significant, as these spices became fundamental in the development of Thai curry. The 17th century saw the arrival of Portuguese colonizers, who introduced new ingredients and cooking techniques to Thailand. Notably, the use of coconut milk in curry, a key feature in many Thai curries today, was a Portuguese contribution (Anchalee Pim, 2018). This marked a fusion between Indian spice traditions and Western ingredients, creating the foundation for what later became distinctively Thai

curry. Before the Sukhothai era, in inscriptions dedicated to monks around the end of the 19th Buddhist century, the words "Mo Khao Mo Kaeng" appeared in the Bihar Chedi Inscription (side 2, 1850 CE), referencing an offering of curry to the temple. It can be inferred that curry existed as a common dish in the Sukhothai period, although its type was not specified. During the Sukhothai period, curry served as both nourishment and ritual offering, linking food with religious and community life—a pattern that continued into later eras. The evolution of Thai curry continued through the 19th century during the reigns of King Rama IV and King Rama V. The royal court's culinary experimentation led to the refinement and diversification of curry recipes. This era saw the emergence of well-known curry types such as red curry (*Kaeng Phet*), green curry (*Kaeng Khiew Wan*), and massaman curry (*Kaeng Massaman*) (Preecha Sukphong, 2015). However, it is assumed that they were probably eating "Pla Chon Jungle Curry". The main dish for Thai people is rice, and they like spicy food. It is necessary to have curry on the table at every meal. "See this one pot of rice, cook this one pot of curry" and "Every royal servant eats rice and curry" show that in the past, local ingredients such as freshwater fish and aquatic animals caught from rivers, canals, meat, vegetables, and local fruits were used in cooking since the Sukhothai era when it grew up to be an important trading center. This made Siam or Thailand a center of diverse cultures rich in food and drink, which is recorded in *Traibhum Phra Ruang* by Phraya Lithai (Department of Fine Arts, 1961, p. 10). When King Ramkhamhaeng's reign ended, Sukhothai began to weaken until finally Ayutthaya was established as the capital instead in 1350, which was during the reign of King U Thong until the reign of King Naresuan onwards.

**Ayutthaya Era:** Ayutthaya became the center of both domestic and international trade. There were trade connections and people traveled by water using boats as vehicles until it was called the "Venice of the East." The palace kitchens of King Narai the Great reflected cosmopolitanism, integrating Chinese, Japanese, Persian, Indian, and European influences (Yaowanut Wesaphada, 2001, p.100). During this time, Thai curry was seasoned mainly with pepper before chili was introduced by the Portuguese. The curry-paste ingredients comprised pepper, lemongrass, onions, garlic, galangal, fermented fish, and shrimp paste (Wyatt & Patani, 1967).

The introduction of chili peppers transformed Thai curry into a distinctive spicy cuisine, differentiating it from its Indian and Persian roots. Massaman curry, which derived from Indian and Persian influence, became emblematic of Thai culinary diplomacy. According to historical accounts, Chek Ahmad, a Persian trader working in King Narai's royal court, adapted Muslim curry by replacing milk or yogurt with coconut milk (Santi Santi Sawetwimon, 2000, p.46). This substitution represented a culinary innovation that balanced foreign influence with local taste—marking one of the earliest examples of Thai-style fusion cooking.

**Thonburi and Early Rattanakosin Periods:** Evidence from *Mae Krua Hua Pa* by Thanpuying Plian Phasakonwong—the first Thai cookbook—demonstrates continuity from the Sukhothai and

Ayutthaya eras to Thonburi and Rattanakosin. Food from the Thonburi period showed Thai-Chinese cultural blending (Kobkaew Nathapinij, 1999, p.225). During early Rattanakosin, culinary arts flourished, with refined versions of traditional curries emerging under royal patronage. The Thai royal kitchen played a crucial role in formalizing recipes, elevating household dishes into national culinary heritage, and standardizing curry preparation for palace and ceremonial use. In the 20th and 21st centuries, Thai curry continued evolving under globalization. The proliferation of Thai restaurants worldwide led to adaptations of traditional recipes for diverse palates. Globalization not only spread Thai curry internationally but also created hybrid identities—"glocal curries"—that merged local authenticity with international expectations (Wong, 2017). During King Bhumibol Adulyadej's reign (Rama IX), the modernization of Thai cuisine coincided with cultural diplomacy. Thai curry became a representative dish for Thailand in international events, solidifying its image as a global soft power ambassador.

### Summary of Evolution

Across historical periods—Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Thonburi, Rattanakosin, and the Modern Era—Thai curry evolved from sacred offerings into a dynamic symbol of national identity. This culinary evolution mirrors Thailand's historical resilience and adaptability, showing how local traditions absorbed global influences to create a unique cultural product that now drives tourism, international trade, and destination competitiveness. Therefore, understanding Thai curry's historical narrative provides not only a culinary perspective but also a foundation for developing cultural tourism and soft power strategies aligned with Thailand's contemporary identity.

## EVOLUTION OF THAI CURRY



Picture 1: Evolution of Thai Curry

Table 1 Summary of the Thai Curry historical context

Sukhothai Era (13th Century)	Ayutthaya Era (1350-1767)	Thonburi Era (1767-1782)	Rattanakosin Era (1782-Present)	Modern Era (20th-21st Century)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Introduction of Indian spices (turmeric, coriander, cumin)</li> <li>● Early references to curry in inscriptions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Influence of Portuguese: Introduction of coconut milk and chili peppers</li> <li>● Ayutthaya as a trade hub, introduction of Massaman curry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Continuity from previous eras with added Thai-Chinese influences</li> <li>● The first Thai cookbook "Mae Krua Hua Pra"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Refinement and diversification of curry recipes</li> <li>● Notable curries like red, green, and massaman curry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Globalization and international adaptations of Thai curry</li> <li>● Fusion dishes and innovations in Thai cuisine</li> </ul>

### Thai curry and Thai way of Life

Thai curry plays a vital role in both Thai culinary tradition and the broader representation of the Thai way of life. It is not merely a dish but a reflection of Thai cultural wisdom, where the selection of ingredients, cooking methods, and communal dining practices express deep social and cultural meanings. (Rungrawee & Preecha, 2019). In Thai culture, food is more than sustenance, it is an expression of relationship, generosity, and creativity. Each region's curry conveys not only flavor but also stories about local identity, seasonal adaptation, and cultural exchange. (Wong, 2017; Yaowanut Wesaphada, 2001). The daily preparation and sharing of curry connect families and communities. The process of pounding curry paste (*Nam Prik Kaeng*) together with fresh herbs such as lemongrass, galangal, kaffir lime peel, and chili represents a living tradition that has been passed down through generations (Anchalee Pim, 2018). These ingredients embody regional identities: the northern style uses *makhwen* and *ma khaen*; the northeastern (Isan) style features *bai yanang* and fermented fish; the southern style includes turmeric and coconut milk—each expressing a way of life tied to geography and belief systems (Department of Fine Arts, 1961; Kobkaew Nathapinij, 1999). Thai curry also reflects adaptability and innovation, as Thais creatively integrate foreign influences into local contexts. The Portuguese introduction of chili and coconut milk, for instance, was localized to fit Thai taste preferences, resulting in a balance of spicy, sweet, salty, and creamy flavors (Pim, 2018; Santi Sawetwimon, 2000).

This adaptive spirit continues today through "culinary innovation," where local chefs reinterpret traditional curry for global audiences while maintaining authenticity. This demonstrates the coexistence of tradition and modernity within Thai food culture (Wong, 2017). Furthermore, Thai curry is deeply linked with religious and communal ceremonies such as ordinations, merit-

making events, and temple festivals, where sharing food signifies compassion and social unity (Department of Cultural Promotion, 2020). In this sense, curry acts as a cultural narrative medium—connecting food with faith, place, and people—and plays a crucial role in defining Thailand's intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2022). From a tourism perspective, Thai curry represents a “culinary experience” that attracts travelers to explore regional food routes and cooking workshops (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023). Transforming curry from a household dish into a tourism product not only promotes local economies but also strengthens Thailand's “soft power” through cultural diplomacy and gastronomic storytelling (Preecha Sukphong, 2015; Wong, 2017). Thus, Thai curry symbolizes the harmony between nature, culture, and community, serving as a flavorful ambassador that tells the story of Thailand's way of life through aroma, taste, and creativity. Ultimately, Thai curry reflects a philosophy of living—balancing simplicity and sophistication, tradition and innovation, local roots and global vision (Lalit Maha, 2010; Rungrawee & Preecha, 2019).

### Types of Thai curry

Curry has different ingredients depending on the type of curry. It has been popular in Thailand since the Sukhothai period. Previously, authentic Thai curry was curry without coconut milk, and no spices were added. Local vegetables and herbal ingredients were used. Later, there was trading contact with foreign countries. There are many types of Thai curry in the country, both with and without curry paste, using stock, coconut milk, and milk as ingredients. If we categorize curry, we can include all curry with boiled food. Liquid food can be sipped or mixed with rice. But if we compare Thai food with Western food service, curry is in the main course group, while boiled food is in the soup group. The variations depend on the culture of each region of Thailand, which was influenced by Indian civilization about 1,000 years ago (Pariwongkhunton & Thokaew, 2024), and have been developed by combining, modifying, and inventing seasoning techniques to suit the Thai people continuously until many new recipes are popular presently. Fusion is prevalent. For example, the recipe for “Kaeng Kua Prik Kee Noo”, “red curry” also known as “chicken red curry”, does not include coconut milk. However, when the Thai people grow fonder of coconut milk, they preferred Gaeng Phed with coconut milk, and by the end of the reign, the name “Gaeng Phed” with coconut milk had been simplified to Gaeng Phed.

Gaeng Phed or Gaeng Kai's original recipe, which did not use coconut milk, was renamed “Gaeng Pra”. The term Pra is an old language that signifies cooking, and it is also the title of Thanpuying Plian's Thai cookbook, “Mae Krua Hua Pra,” which was the first Thai cookbook published by King Mongkut (King Rama VI). There has been a culture of using spices and changing from using fresh milk to coconut milk. During the Ayutthaya period, massaman curry that

received culture from Persia was introduced, and has continued to be flavored with Thai flavors until the present.

Thai curry is generally categorized based on the color and ingredients of the curry paste (*Nam Prik Kaeng*). These categories not only represent differences in flavor but also embody the diversity of Thailand's regional cultures and the interaction between local and foreign influences (Rungrawee & Preecha, 2019). There are several major types of Thai curry, such as red curry (*Kaeng Phet*), green curry (*Kaeng Khiew Wan*), yellow curry (*Kaeng Kari*), Massaman curry (*Kaeng Massaman*), Panang curry (*Kaeng Panang*), and Jungle curry (*Kaeng Pa*). Each type reflects unique regional ingredients, preparation methods, and social contexts.

#### 1. Red Curry (*Kaeng Phet*)

Red curry is one of the most common types of Thai curry and is famous for its vibrant color derived from dried red chilies. It combines a balanced mixture of chili, garlic, galangal, lemongrass, kaffir lime peel, and shrimp paste. The flavor is spicy, salty, and slightly sweet. Historically, red curry evolved from the Ayutthaya royal cuisine, adapting influences from Indian and Portuguese cooking traditions (Santi Sawetwimon, 2000). Today, it remains a staple dish in both household and restaurant menus, often paired with meats such as pork, chicken, or duck.

#### 2. Green Curry (*Kaeng Khiew Wan*)

Green curry is characterized by its bright green hue from fresh green chilies. The curry paste includes lemongrass, galangal, garlic, coriander roots, and sweet basil. The use of coconut milk softens the spice, producing a sweet and creamy texture. Green curry represents the culinary creativity of the Rattanakosin period, combining local herbs with Western cooking techniques introduced through trade and diplomacy (Anchalee Pim, 2018). It has become internationally recognized, symbolizing Thai culinary identity through global restaurant chains (Wong, 2017).

#### 3. Yellow Curry (*Kaeng Kari*)

Yellow curry, known for its golden color, is influenced by Indian-style curry (*Kari*). It contains turmeric, cumin, and coriander seeds, producing a mild and aromatic flavor. Its creation demonstrates Thailand's ability to localize foreign spices into Thai cuisine while preserving the balance of taste and aroma (Lalit Maha, 2010). This curry type is widely enjoyed in southern Thailand and coastal provinces where turmeric is abundant.

#### 4. Massaman Curry (*Kaeng Massaman*)

Massaman curry is one of Thailand's most globally celebrated dishes, blending Thai and Persian influences. The term "Massaman" likely originates from "Musulman," meaning "Muslim." It combines dried spices such as cinnamon, cardamom, nutmeg, cloves, and bay leaves with local ingredients like coconut milk and palm sugar. This dish was first introduced during the Ayutthaya era under King Narai, influenced by Persian traders (Yaowanut Wesaphada, 2001; Santi Santi Sawetwimon, 2000). The unique fusion of flavors—sweet, sour, and aromatic—reflects both

cultural diplomacy and adaptation of global ingredients into local culinary identity. According to TasteAtlas (2022), Massaman curry ranks among the top 10 most delicious dishes in the world, symbolizing Thai cuisine's international soft power.

#### 5. Panang Curry (Kaeng Panang)

Panang curry is thicker and less spicy than red curry. It contains peanuts, which give it a creamy, nutty flavor. The dish likely originated in central Thailand but was influenced by southern Muslim cuisine. The use of peanuts shows how Thai culinary identity evolved through trade with Malaysia and the southern border provinces (Kobkaew Nathapinij, 1999). This type of curry is commonly served with pork or chicken and reflects the regional harmony of sweet and savory tastes.

#### 6. Jungle Curry (Kaeng Pa)

Jungle curry is distinctive for not using coconut milk, giving it a clear broth with an intense, herbal flavor. It originated from forest communities in northern and northeastern Thailand, using wild herbs, bamboo shoots, and local vegetables. The simplicity and use of natural ingredients mirror the traditional self-sufficient lifestyle of rural Thai people (Department of Cultural Promotion, 2020). Jungle curry highlights the ecological relationship between humans and their environment in Thai culinary culture.

Each type of Thai curry not only showcases culinary diversity but also embodies historical adaptation, religious symbolism, and regional identity. The combination of local herbs, imported spices, and creative techniques demonstrates how Thai food evolves through intercultural exchange while preserving its essence. From a tourism perspective, these varieties can be developed into "Culinary Tourism Routes," offering immersive experiences that connect visitors to local communities, traditions, and Thai cultural identity (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023). Thus, understanding the diversity of Thai curry contributes to the broader appreciation of Thailand's soft power and its living cultural heritage.

#### Identity of Thai curry in four regions

Thai curry has developed regional characteristics that reflect the geography, local ingredients, belief systems, and ways of life unique to each part of Thailand (Rungrawee & Preecha, 2019). The four main regions—Northern, Northeastern (Isan), Central, and Southern—present distinctive flavors, ingredients, and cooking techniques. *Northern Region (Lanna Cuisine)*: The northern region's curry, influenced by Lanna culture, emphasizes mild flavors and the natural aroma of herbs rather than spiciness. Coconut milk is rarely used because the region's cooler climate does not favor coconut cultivation. Popular dishes include *Kaeng Hung Lay* (Burmese-influenced pork curry), *Kaeng Ho*, and *Kaeng Khanun* (jackfruit curry). These dishes use ingredients such as garlic, shallots, turmeric, and tomatoes. The use of local herbs such as

*makhwen* (northern Sichuan pepper) and *ma khaen* creates a unique fragrance, reflecting the Lanna people's preference for earthy, herbal cuisine (Kobkaew Nathapinij, 1999). Culinarily, Northern curry represents the harmony between nature and community—it is usually cooked in large pots for sharing during festivals or temple fairs, illustrating social bonding and communal living (Department of Cultural Promotion, 2020). Today, Northern curries have become culinary ambassadors for sustainable tourism through local food trails in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, combining food, culture, and storytelling (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023).

*Central Region (Royal and Everyday Cuisine)*: Central Thai curries balance flavors—spicy, sweet, salty, and creamy—and make use of coconut milk as a base. This balance represents the central region's role as the meeting point of diverse cultures. Famous curries include *Kaeng Khiew Wan* (green curry), *Kaeng Phet* (red curry), and *Kaeng Chuchi Pla* (spicy fish curry). The region is also known for *Kaeng Panang* and *Kaeng Massaman*. The culinary sophistication of central Thai curry originates from royal palace cuisine during the Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin periods, where local ingredients were combined with imported spices (Yaowanut Wesaphada, 2001; Santi Sawetwimon, 2000). This refinement later spread to everyday households, illustrating how royal culinary standards influenced the general population and became a national identity. In contemporary contexts, central Thai curries are the most recognized globally, functioning as Thailand's "gastronomic soft power" through restaurants, culinary schools, and international food diplomacy (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023).

*Northeastern Region (Isan Cuisine)*: Isan curries are deeply connected to the agricultural lifestyle and seasonal ingredients. Instead of coconut milk, locals use *bai yanang* (*Tiliacora triandra* leaves) juice as a thickener. Fermented fish (*pla ra*) is a signature flavoring agent. Common curries include *Kaeng Om*, *Kaeng Nor Mai* (bamboo curry), and *Kaeng Hed* (mushroom curry). These dishes have a salty and herbal taste with a spicy aroma. The culinary identity of Isan curry reflects self-sufficiency, community sharing, and adaptation to the dry landscape of the Khorat Plateau (Wong, 2017). Its distinctive aroma and use of local herbs demonstrate how food functions as a "cultural survival mechanism" rooted in ecological adaptation. Furthermore, the growing popularity of Isan food in urban areas symbolizes the cultural mobility of rural cuisine, enhancing regional pride and promoting cultural tourism in the Mekong subregion (Preecha Sukphong, 2015).

*Southern Region (Peninsular Cuisine)* : Southern curries are characterized by their intense heat and strong flavor, using large amounts of chili, turmeric, and coconut milk. Well-known southern curries include *Kaeng Tai Pla* (fermented fish curry), *Kaeng Som* (sour curry), *Kaeng Kua* (curry with pineapple and fish), and *Kaeng Luang*. The use of turmeric and fresh herbs reflects the region's biodiversity and historical trade with Malaysia, Indonesia, and India (Lalit Maha, 2010). Southern curry represents the intersection of Buddhist and Muslim culinary

traditions, creating rich and complex flavor profiles unique to the peninsular region (Anchalee Pim, 2018). In addition, the region's vibrant street-food culture—particularly in Songkhla, Phuket, and Nakhon Si Thammarat—has transformed local curries into key tourism attractions, promoting regional branding through gastronomy (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023).

The diversity of Thai curry across four regions reveals the interconnectedness between geography, faith, and culture. Each region's curry is not just a food item but a symbolic narrative that communicates lifestyle, values, and history. From a cultural perspective, Thai curry represents local wisdom in balancing flavors, while from a socio-economic perspective, it reflects the potential for sustainable food tourism and cultural branding. By preserving regional curry identities, Thailand maintains its intangible cultural heritage and strengthens its position in the global soft power landscape (UNESCO, 2022).

## Discussion

The findings confirmed that Thai curry is far more than just a dish. It is a complex and evolving cultural symbol deeply integrated into the Thai way of life. Analysis across four regions confirms that the diversity of curry types and their distinct local ingredients and preparation methods reflect specific geographical and cultural identities. Thai curry, a prominent Thai dish, has a rich history and reflects the diverse elements within the Thai culture. It has influenced tourism in Thailand and is known for its spicy flavors and vibrant colors. Popular variations include Green curry, Massaman curry, Hang lay curry, Ho curry, Yellow curry, Khae curry, Om curry, Pra curry, and Roasted duck curry. Thai curry showcases regional diversity, even to the extent of incorporating elements from China and Western culinary traditions from France, Portugal, and Holland. The global recognition of Thai curry, exemplified by the "World's Best Curry Award," demonstrates its potential as a "soft power" tool for Thailand (Royal Thai Government Public Relations Department, 2022). In addition, Thai curry is also set to feature among the top 100 most delectable local foods worldwide, solidifying Thailand's reputation as a "culinary paradise" of the world (TasteAtlas Awards, 2022; Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023). Furthermore, the study highlights that the "narrative" of Thai curry—its historical evolution, symbolic meanings, and regional storytelling—can be transformed into an experiential form of cultural tourism. Culinary experiences such as traditional cooking workshops, regional food routes, and heritage-based gastronomy programs allow visitors to engage with Thai identity through taste and participation. These experiences contribute to Thailand's "destination competitiveness" by differentiating its tourism offerings through cultural authenticity and culinary creativity. By positioning Thai curry as both a cultural symbol and an experiential product, Thailand can enhance its image as a global hub of cultural and gastronomic tourism. In conclusion, Thai curry embodies the integration of culture, history, and innovation. It serves as a living representation of Thai identity and

demonstrates how food can operate as both heritage and strategy—bridging the local and global through soft power, creativity, and sustainable tourism.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study finds Thai curry as a crucial element of Thailand's intangible cultural heritage and a proven soft power asset. The comprehensive narrative derived from its regional diversity and historical fusion demonstrates its power in promoting the national identity worldwide. The curry's global recognition confirms its role as an icon of the 'Thai Way of Life', reflecting a dynamic tradition of culinary mastery and cultural synthesis. Moreover, the study emphasizes that Thai curry's narrative potential can be further developed into cultural experiences and tourism-based learning activities such as regional food routes, culinary storytelling, and heritage cooking workshops that enhance visitor engagement and strengthen Thailand's destination competitiveness. To fully leverage this potential and ensure the conservation of its authenticity amidst global changes, the study presents a critical implication: the need for systematic research and documentation. This is not merely an academic exercise but a strategic imperative. The study recommends establishing a national-level framework for systematic research and documentation, conforming to international standards, to meticulously record both authentic traditional recipes and innovative adaptations while fostering intergenerational knowledge transfer. This commitment reflects a policy of dynamic preservation, linking the core culinary heritage with necessary innovation to safeguard the integrity of this cultural treasure. Future efforts must focus on formalizing this knowledge base to sustain the global narrative and secure Thai curry's long-term status as a leading soft power instrument for the nation. Future efforts should integrate cultural policy, tourism development, and creative economy strategies to sustain the global narrative of Thai curry. Through such collaboration, Thai curry can continue serving as a living representation of Thai identity and a leading soft power instrument that connects local wisdom with global appreciation.

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