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**Is there really a mother behind every chef? Case studies of six chefs in Southeast Asia**

Recent discussion in the literature focuses on how female relatives influence those who become professional chefs and the importance of social and domestic examples in inspiring the provision of commercial hospitality. Using findings from a sample of six case studies in Southeast Asia, this study suggests that female relatives have an effect in occupational choice for classically trained Asian male chefs and restaurant owners. Social and domestic examples were identified as less important in this sample, raising questions about how different cultural attitudes to the role of food and its sharing may influence occupational choice among non-western professional cooks.

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**Keywords:** Chefs; occupational choice; sociocultural influences; Southeast Asia

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## **Introduction**

Most people who become professional cooks have had some sort of exposure to the art of cooking during their early lives, either from parents, or perhaps from the family's cook. American food writer Barbara Costikyan (1984) asserted, "In the childhood memories of every good cook, there's a large kitchen, a warm stove, a simmering pot and a mom" (p. 49). Others also stress the importance of a mother's or grandmother's influence on future choice of occupation as a professional cook (e.g., Cooper and Holmes, 2005; Styler, 2005). Lashley (2007, 2008) and O'Mahony (2003, 2005) linked the domestic and the commercial provision of hospitality, claiming that a common source of inspiration for barkeepers, chefs, hoteliers, and restaurateurs is learning about food, dining, hosting, and the rules of hospitableness in the home. O'Mahony (2006), drawing on the work of Darke and Gurney (2000) and Symons (1982), called this the "commodification of domestic provision" (p. 84).

Less often asserted are two contrary viewpoints about the source of early exposure to the art of cooking. The first is that, for some chefs and restaurateurs, influence, motivation, and mentoring come from male relatives who like to cook and who have a passion for food (Seager, 2007), or who even just share a common characteristic such as an interest in nature (Farney, 2003). The second is that early exposure to food and to cooking may be in a commercial, rather than a domestic, situation (Ferguson and Zukin, 1998). Famed American chefs Dean Fearing (Behind the burner, No date) and Paul Kahn (ABC News/Nightline, 2010) both reported the importance in their choice of occupation of growing up surrounded by food and cooking in commercial hospitality operations owned by their fathers.

Few studies of non-Western chefs reported in the literature as most of the evidence concerning influences on occupational choice comes from chefs and restaurateurs in Western societies.

### **Research purpose**

The specific purpose of this paper is to report information gathered from a sample of Southeast Asian chefs concerning the influences that made them choose to enter the commercial hospitality industry. This research aimed to contribute to discussions about, first, influences on occupational choice of professional cooks and, second, the role of social and domestic examples in inspiring commercial hospitality provision.

### **Research method**

The target population comprised successful chefs, including successful owner-chefs. As Altinay and Paraskevas (2008) pointed out, probability sampling is often difficult to achieve in the real world of hospitality research. This investigation therefore used the non-probability approach of purposive, or judgmental, sampling (Altinay and Paraskevas, 2008) as a cost-effective means of obtaining information and as sampling for proportionality was not a primary concern. Potential participants had to be ‘successful,’ defined as meaning that participants were executive chefs (or chef-owners) in highly-regarded independent restaurants, or in signature restaurants in four or five star hotels. Participants, moreover, had to have received a classical training in western cooking. Individual participants who met these criteria were invited to participate in the study.

Interviews were conducted between 2006 and 2010 as eligible participants were identified and agreed to participate in the research. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews. A general interview guide ensured that data were collected on the same general areas of

information for each subject, including biographic information, and attitudes towards food and cooking. Participants also were asked to name the person or persons who had most influenced them in their choice of occupation. Interviews were conducted at the participants' workplaces, and field notes were taken during the interviews or compiled as soon as possible afterwards. Notes were analyzed and categorized according to the themes investigated in this study so that the information collected acquired value.

## **Sample**

The findings reported here come from a larger, mainly exploratory study into the careers of male Asian executive chefs and restaurateurs – males because classically-trained women Asian executive chefs are difficult to find. The sample comprised six male chefs and restaurateurs – two Thais and one Malaysian Chinese working in Pattaya (Thailand), two Filipinos working in Manila (The Philippines), and one Singaporean Chinese executive chef-owner. All six participants were classically trained, either in western culinary institutes (e.g., Copenhagen Hospitality College, Le Cordon Bleu, the Baking Institute of America, and the Culinary Institute of America), or in apprenticeships under classically-trained (and internationally-famous) western chefs such as Mogens Bay Esbensen in major international hotels in Asia. Their careers often have included stints in Michelin-starred restaurants and in hotels such as the Savoy Hotel in London.

One of the Thais was executive chef at a local Thai real estate and hospitality industry conglomerate's flagship hotel, and the other was the owner-chef of a well-known and long-established restaurant. The Malaysian was the gold medal-winning executive chef at the Pattaya property of a US-Singapore joint venture luxury hotel. The career of one of the Filipinos covered

all facets of the industry, including being a culinary and bakery instructor and now executive chef of his own restaurant. The second Filipino was executive chef of his own restaurant and director of several family-owned and long-established restaurants. The Singaporean was an executive chef-owner who had owned and operated several restaurants in east and south-east Asia.

## **Research findings**

The older of the two Thai participants, a locally-famous owner-chef of a long-established restaurant featured in many travel guides, became a chef because “one day I have to be the boss, not just a worker!” He stated that he had been most influenced by advice from an internationally-renowned Dutch restaurateur, artist, and writer who later became his mentor. After a varied work history, he met his future mentor who told him that if he wanted to become his own employer he should “go to the kitchens.” He followed this advice, and embarked on a career that included apprenticeship training with a famous Danish executive chef and cookbook writer, and working in ships’ galleys. He worked in his mentor’s restaurant for several years before opening his own restaurant some 35 years ago, which is now seen as an icon of Pattaya dining.

During his secondary schooling, the Thai executive chef helped out family finances by working at after-school jobs, mainly in hotel kitchens. Learning about life on the bottom rung in the professional kitchen did not deter him, however. He remarked that “My mother encouraged me in my career – she had been taught to cook when she was a young woman.” He studied cooking at a Danish hospitality college for four and a half years, and then studied wines and restaurant management for a further two years. He said of his career, “I am quite ambitious, you know – I wanted to be a *chef de cuisine* in a gourmet restaurant.”

The Malaysian's early ambition was to become a professional soccer player but his interest in cooking was originally stimulated by evening part-time work in a kitchen, where "all the hustle and bustle and excitement captured my imagination." His interest was further developed by a working holiday in a hotel kitchen in New Zealand. His diligent attitude attracted the attention of the Austrian executive chef, who offered him a job and the start of his career. He remarked of this executive chef that "He was probably the most influential person" in his occupation choice but added, "I've been lucky in my career as I've had so many people helping me." He admitted, however, "I always wanted to be Number One! I like my chefs to be competitive, too, because it brings the standards up."

The younger Filipino is a third-generation restaurateur who helped out in his family's restaurant kitchens as a child, making Filipino-style fruit salad: "My sister and I would 'work' lunch there." His early exposure to food in his family's restaurants made him interested in pursuing culinary studies. Though he studied at an American hospitality school, he commented that he had learned to cook from a cookbook "out of necessity when I was an undergraduate student."

"I was living in an apartment by myself, and for the first few months I survived on pizza delivery and take-out. But the Pinoy in me needed some real food. And some rice, of course! Moreover, the regular deliveries were having an effect on my wallet and my waistline. I found myself in a bookshop one day, and I bought my first cookbook. I started with the pasta section and worked my way through the breakfast, soup, and meats section. Even after lots of trials and errors, I noticed that I was enjoying myself."

When asked who in his life had influenced him the most, he said, "I can't name any particular person, but I have my parents to thank for instilling in us kids the value of work." He added, "If not a chef, I would have been an engineer! But my math was not very good, so I became a cook instead."

The second Filipino's interest in food and cooking was established as a child by his aunt's passion for food as she cooked for his extended Filipino family. About her, he said, "she

cooked so well, she was the best cook ever and she had the passion for it.” His interest was further stimulated when his older female cousin took cooking classes (“and this furthered our experience in good food and tremendous eating”), and his father’s passion for good food. He remarked of his father’s attitude to food, “As I grew up, we always had good food because my father always wanted the best.” This involved not only dining in restaurants where the future chef was exposed to good Western cuisine, but also the purchase of good raw ingredients from the best sources. Ultimately, however, he attributed the real start of his love for cooking and baking to the first two professional cooks that he encountered – two chefs his aunt hired whenever his family entertained at a big party when he was a young child. Of them he said,

“Who started all this love for cooking and baking in me? Two chefs my aunt would hire every time we had a big party. These two men were the first chefs that I enjoyed being around when I was a young child, I clearly remember both of them moving around and feeding me – as a child, I was not a big eater but I enjoyed parties.”

The Singaporean, as a child, helped his parents (and later his widowed mother) with the family’s roadside fruit stall. He reported that he was spoiled by his grandmother, whose cooking he remembered fondly, but stated, “I just ate whatever was given to me. I was not a foodie when I was young.” He first dreamed of becoming a mechanic, and then later of traveling around the world. Following his compulsory military service in Singapore’s armed forces, he became a ship’s steward, and discovered that the job required kitchen training. He learned to bake and to make soup and stock, and acquired a love for baking and cooking. He said, “I thoroughly enjoyed it, and it opened my eyes to the wonderful world of cooking.” He received his early formal culinary training at the Singapore Hotel Association Tourism and Education Centre (SHATEC), further training in classical cooking under a French chef in Singapore, and then studied in France. Despite remembering being pampered by his grandmother, he could not name any person as being most influential in his initial choice of occupation. He attributed his professionalism to the influ-

ence of the French chef under whom he first worked, however. He added, “Who thinks that they’re going to be a great chef at the start? In the beginning, I just wanted to be a good cook.”

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Lock (2005) pointed out that, in occupational choice, people are subject to forces they cannot control, which involve social and cultural forces they cannot influence. He termed this “the sociocultural determinant approach,” writing that “According to this theory, the kind of work you do is basically determined by environmental factors; the job chooses you more than you choose the job” (p. 5). Only two of the six Southeast Asian male chefs reported neither parental example or influence nor any prior experience with cooking before they decided to become professional cooks. The first one’s decision was driven by a need to one day become his own boss rather than someone else’s employee. The second one’s interest in professional cooking was sparked by a part-time work in a hotel cooking but fanned by working with a professionally-trained European chef while on a working holiday in New Zealand.

The four others all reported that their decision to become a professional cook was influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the example of female family members – a grandmother, mother, aunt or cousin. None of the participants, however, admitted to learning to cook from a female relation. This influence included being pampered by a grandmother in one case, and encouraged in his career choice by a mother who had some culinary training of her own in another. For the third participant, the influence also included working, with his sister, in restaurants owned and operated by a mother and an aunt. For the final participant, the initial influence of his aunt’s cooking for his extended family and of his cousin’s cooking course was complemented by

his father's interest in food and in dining in fine restaurants, and his childhood experience of meeting male chefs hired to cater to family parties – and by their food.

For some of the participants, early interest and experience in food and cooking occurred in commercial situations, i.e., when they helped out in the family business or had part-time jobs in hotel or restaurant kitchens or when their work required them to prepare food. In only one case did a participant report a significant example of domestic hospitality on his choice of occupation, an example that occurred in the context of an extended Filipino family entertaining family, friends and business acquaintances, but the context also involved the commercial participation of two paid male outsiders.

## **Implications**

Taken collectively, the six interviews lend support to the view that professional cooks are consciously or unconsciously influenced by their female relatives when it comes to their choice of occupation. It may not be, however, a mother who figures most strongly in their memories, and the female relative's influence may be strengthened by that of significant males, who may or may not be family members. For the Asian males in this sample, there was not a mother behind every chef!

At the same time, these six interviews raise questions about the importance of social and domestic, rather than commercial, examples in the commercial hospitality provision in all cultural contexts. Only one chef in this sample reported any real exposure to, and experience of, food, dining, and hosting in a family or domestic situation. For the others, commercial experience was the reported dominant influence on their choice of occupation.

There is an important caveat to this latter conclusion, however, that suggests the need for a deeper investigation into how socio-cultural examples influence occupational choice among non-western chefs. The caveat derives from differences in the role of food in western and non-western (in this case, specifically Asian) cultures. In East and South-east Asian cultures, the sharing of food and drink with family, friends, and colleagues is an integral cultural trait. A visit to the home of friends or relations requires the bringing of a (sometimes symbolic) gift of food (see Yan, 2005), and meals are routinely shared with visitors. This behavior is part of what Yan (2005), referring to Chinese culture, described as “the central role of food in our socialization” (p. 34). In Filipino society, “Food is shared all the time with the people around you, whether it’s for meals at home or for public celebrations” (Maxion, 2010). Personal experience shows that Thais also share food, and many believe that eating alone will bring bad luck.

It is possible that this cultural custom is so deeply ingrained in the Thai, Filipino and ethnic Chinese participants in this study that sharing food and drink with family, visitors, and friends was not seen by them something that needed singling out for mention as an influence on their occupational choice. The sharing of food and hospitality with friends, neighbors, and visitors in the Asian home is customary and therefore, for the participants in this study, it was perhaps invisible. If that was the case and if commercial hospitality is the commoditization of domestic provision, then the different ways in which this commoditization takes place in various cultures merits further investigation.

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