

Popularity of Khmer Foods: Possibility for a Successful Marketing Plan



Vandet Mean

Lyceum of the Philippines University Manila

ABSTRACT: Khmer food remains relatively undiscovered by both Asians and foreigners. This presents an opportunity for the researcher to explore and promote the popularity of Khmer cuisine to the Generation Z, eventually devising an effective marketing strategy. This study utilized a descriptive quantitative research. In the context of this research, the 260 Cambodian respondents, belonging to Generation Z and having experience with Khmer Foods, were deliberately chosen to align with the study's specific requirements. The findings revealing the factors influencing individuals' interest in Khmer foods shed light on the diverse and multifaceted aspects that contribute to the popularity of this culinary tradition. The findings indicating the factors contributing to the increasing popularity of Khmer foods among Generation Z shed light on the key influencers shaping their culinary preferences.

INTRODUCTION

Plants play a crucial role as essential food sources for the global population, with certain species possessing significant market value due to their nutritional properties (Lindsay, 2023). The growing public interest in nutrition and healthy eating has led to an increased demand for traditional foods, particularly those of plant origin. Recognizing the potential profitability, food enterprises have responded to this demand for traditional foods (Trichopoulou et al., 2007). However, marketing strategies for Traditional Food Products (TFPs) often concentrate on domestic markets due to lower administrative barriers and the complexities associated with international marketing chains. Nevertheless, there is a rising global demand for traditional foods, particularly in high-income countries, leading to the introduction of various exotic products into the international market (Hermann, 2009).

A notable example is amaranth (*Amaranthus* spp.), a staple in the historical diets of the Inca, Maya, and Aztec civilizations in South and Central America. The 1980s witnessed a surge in global interest in amaranth when the United States National Academy of Sciences conducted research, highlighting its remarkable nutritional value and agronomic potential (Caselato-Sousa and Amaya-Farfan, 2012). Many TFPs are derived from underutilized food crops—plant species traditionally consumed by local communities but now overshadowed by more common staple crops. These underutilized crops face challenges such as poor technological properties (e.g., limited shelf life), insufficient recognition of their potential (e.g., nutritional and health benefits), reputational issues (e.g., being associated with famine or poverty, improper handling and storage, and hygiene concerns), and low consumer awareness.

To enhance the market systems for TFPs, effective marketing strategies are required to overcome reputational barriers and emphasize the beneficial properties of underutilized crops. However, the development of such strategies is hindered by a lack of detailed knowledge regarding the perceptions and preferences of potential customers for TFPs. Understanding these aspects is essential for creating efficient marketing strategies that promote the unique qualities of these products. Spices or herbs, whether crafted at home or produced by machines, are transformed into pastes known as "Kroeung," serving as a fundamental element in numerous Khmer dishes. In the realm of Khmer cuisine, any dish featuring Kroeung incorporates the suffix "-Kroeung" into its name (Veneracion, 2021). Khmer culinary offerings are widely acknowledged for their healthiness and nutritional richness, characterized by a light and delectable nature (Any, 2015). Despite boasting a plethora of recipes, Khmer cuisine remains relatively concealed within the borders of Cambodia and has yet to gain substantial recognition on the global stage. While Thai and Vietnamese cuisines have gained widespread acclaim, Khmer food remains relatively undiscovered by both Asians and foreigners. This presents an opportunity for the researcher to explore and promote the popularity of Khmer cuisine to the Generation Z, eventually devising an effective marketing strategy.

Khmer cuisine, deeply rooted in the historical fabric of Cambodia, offers a fascinating journey through time, reflecting the nation's cultural richness and the impact of external influences. Emerging from the grandeur of the Khmer Empire, which

Popularity of Khmer Foods: Possibility for a Successful Marketing Plan

thrived from the 9th to the 15th centuries, the cuisine was intricately woven with the empire's sophisticated agricultural system. Rice, the dietary cornerstone, formed the basis of numerous dishes that evolved into the diverse array found in contemporary Khmer cooking (angkorfocus.com).

Geographical proximity and cultural exchanges with China, India, and Vietnam introduced a myriad of flavors and culinary techniques to Khmer cuisine. The French colonial period added a distinctive layer with the infusion of baguettes, coffee, and French culinary methods. This fusion created a unique blend of traditional Khmer elements and French influence, exemplifying the adaptability of the culinary tradition (Keng Dam, 2023).

However, the dark chapter of the Khmer Rouge era in the 1970s significantly disrupted Cambodia's culinary landscape. Traditional recipes were lost, and the population faced extreme food shortages. In the aftermath, during the post-Khmer Rouge period, there was a concerted effort to revive and preserve Khmer cuisine as a symbol of national identity. This period of recovery laid the foundation for the modern exploration and celebration of Cambodia's culinary heritage (Grasee, 2023).

Khmer cuisine is characterized by its diverse use of indigenous ingredients. Staples like rice noodles, jasmine rice, freshwater fish, tropical fruits, and aromatic herbs contribute to the distinct flavors of Khmer dishes. Signature dishes such as "Amok," a coconut milk-based curry, and "Bai Sach Chrouk," a breakfast dish featuring grilled pork and rice, showcase the culinary creativity rooted in tradition (Rahuldev, 2022).

In the contemporary context, there is a resurgence of interest in Khmer cuisine on the global stage. Efforts to promote Cambodian food internationally have led to increased recognition, and Khmer chefs are not only preserving traditional recipes but also experimenting with innovative culinary expressions. The act of sharing meals, deeply embedded in Khmer culture, continues to be a significant aspect, blending tradition with a modern approach to create a vibrant and evolving food scene. As Cambodia's culinary identity unfolds, it serves as a testament to the resilience of a people and their determination to preserve, adapt, and celebrate their rich cultural heritage through the art of food.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a descriptive quantitative research methodology, wherein the investigation and depiction of features within a sample or population were the central focus (Coe et al., 2017). The primary objective was to offer a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics inherent in the chosen sample.

Regarding respondent selection, a purposive sampling approach was employed in this paper. Purposive sampling involves non-probability methods where units are intentionally selected based on specific characteristics deemed crucial for the sample. In the context of this research, the 260 Cambodian respondents, belonging to Generation Z and having experience with Khmer Foods, were deliberately chosen to align with the study's specific requirements.

The principal instrument for data collection in this study was a survey questionnaire distributed and retrieved through Google Forms. In the preparation phase, the researcher extensively reviewed literature, including books, unpublished and published theses, dissertations, journals, and other relevant studies, to deepen the understanding of the study's topic. These sources provided valuable insights that contributed to the construction of the questionnaires. To ensure data and findings' accuracy, consistency, and trustworthiness, the researcher conducted validity and reliability tests. Pilot testing involved 10 non-participating respondents to assess reliability.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

1. The findings from the survey of 260 respondents provide insightful information about the level of familiarity with Khmer foods among the sampled population. The results indicate a diverse range of familiarity levels, with 16.3% of respondents describing themselves as somewhat familiar, 39.5% as very familiar, and 43.4% as somewhat familiar with Khmer foods. The relatively high percentage (39.5%) of respondents who claim to be very familiar with Khmer foods suggests a significant awareness or exposure to this culinary tradition within the surveyed group. This could be indicative of a cultural connection or personal interest in exploring and understanding Khmer cuisine. The presence of a substantial portion of respondents (43.4%) who identify as somewhat familiar implies a broader base of recognition, even if not as in-depth as those who consider themselves very familiar. The 16.3% of respondents who characterize themselves as somewhat familiar might represent a group that has a basic understanding or limited exposure to Khmer foods. This segment could potentially be a target for increased awareness campaigns or culinary education initiatives to further enhance their familiarity and appreciation for Khmer cuisine. In essence, the distribution of familiarity levels among the respondents paints a nuanced picture of the varying degrees of awareness and knowledge regarding Khmer foods. These findings can serve as a foundation for developing targeted strategies to promote and popularize Khmer cuisine, both within the surveyed population and potentially in a broader context. Additionally, the data invites further exploration into

Popularity of Khmer Foods: Possibility for a Successful Marketing Plan

the factors influencing different familiarity levels and how these insights can be leveraged to enhance cultural appreciation and cross-cultural understanding through food.

2. The findings revealing the factors influencing individuals' interest in Khmer foods shed light on the diverse and multifaceted aspects that contribute to the popularity of this culinary tradition. A significant majority, comprising 44.3% of respondents, expressed their fascination with Khmer foods due to the diversity of dishes and ingredients. This suggests a recognition and appreciation for the rich tapestry of flavors, textures, and culinary techniques that Khmer cuisine offers. The emphasis on diversity underscores the expansive range of choices within Khmer foods, appealing to a broad spectrum of preferences. Furthermore, the discovery that 14.1% of respondents are drawn to Khmer foods because of their unique flavors and taste highlights the distinct and palate-pleasing qualities inherent in these dishes. The uniqueness of flavors adds a layer of appeal, suggesting that Khmer cuisine offers a sensory experience that distinguishes it from other culinary traditions. This aligns with the broader trend in global gastronomy where uniqueness and distinctiveness are increasingly valued. Additionally, the recognition of the cultural appeal and heritage of Khmer foods by 13.9% of respondents speaks to the cultural significance embedded in this culinary tradition. Khmer cuisine not only satisfies gastronomic preferences but also serves as a cultural identifier, reflecting the heritage and traditions of the Cambodian people. The influence of historical and cultural factors, acknowledged by 7.8% of respondents, further underscores the deep-rooted connection between Khmer foods and Cambodia's rich history. The role of social media platforms in influencing interest in Khmer foods is evident, with 14.7% of respondents citing exposure through social media and social platforms as a significant factor. This reflects the power of digital platforms in shaping culinary preferences and fostering global awareness of diverse cuisines. Positive recommendations from others, though mentioned by a smaller percentage (4.3%), indicate the impact of personal experiences and word-of-mouth endorsements in shaping individuals' culinary choices. In conclusion, the discussion of these findings emphasizes the multifaceted appeal of Khmer foods, encompassing diversity, unique flavors, cultural significance, historical influence, and the role of modern communication channels. Understanding these factors provides valuable insights for both promoting Khmer cuisine locally and enhancing its recognition on the global culinary stage. It also suggests opportunities for targeted marketing strategies, culinary education initiatives, and collaborations to further amplify the allure of Khmer foods.

3. The findings indicating the factors contributing to the increasing popularity of Khmer foods among Generation Z shed light on the key influencers shaping their culinary preferences. The primary driver, identified by 56% of respondents, is the presence of Cambodian restaurants and food establishments. This suggests that the accessibility and visibility of Khmer foods through local dining establishments play a pivotal role in capturing the attention and interest of Generation Z. The prevalence of Cambodian eateries not only serves as a practical introduction to Khmer cuisine but also creates a platform for cultural exchange within the community. Furthermore, the influence of chefs and culinary experts on the international stage, acknowledged by 40.6% of respondents, underscores the impact of global culinary trends and celebrity chefs in shaping the preferences of Generation Z. This finding highlights the importance of the broader culinary landscape, suggesting that exposure to Khmer foods through renowned chefs and international culinary events contributes significantly to their popularity. This influence can be leveraged to enhance the visibility and recognition of Khmer cuisine on a global scale. Additionally, the role of culinary tourism initiatives and food festivals in Cambodia, noted by 3.4% of respondents, represents a smaller but still noteworthy factor. Culinary tourism can create immersive experiences for both locals and visitors, allowing them to explore and appreciate the richness of Khmer foods in their cultural context. While this percentage is relatively lower, the potential impact of well-curated food festivals and culinary tourism initiatives should not be overlooked, especially in fostering a sense of pride and engagement among the local community. In conclusion, the discussion of these findings emphasizes the significance of local establishments, global culinary influencers, and cultural events in driving the increasing popularity of Khmer foods among Generation Z. The recommendations stemming from this insight could include strategies to further promote and support Cambodian restaurants, collaborations with renowned chefs to elevate the international profile of Khmer cuisine, and the enhancement of culinary tourism initiatives to showcase the diversity and uniqueness of Khmer foods. Ultimately, understanding these factors provides valuable insights for both local and global initiatives aimed at celebrating and promoting the richness of Khmer culinary heritage among the younger generation.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Based on the findings indicating varying levels of familiarity with Khmer foods among the surveyed population, several recommendations can be proposed to promote and enhance awareness of Khmer cuisine. First and foremost, there is a need for the development and implementation of culinary education initiatives, including workshops and programs, to impart knowledge about Khmer foods. Collaborating with local educational institutions and community centers to integrate Khmer cuisine into curricula could further contribute to widespread understanding. Concurrently, launching targeted promotional campaigns through both digital and traditional media channels can effectively showcase the unique aspects and flavors of Khmer foods. Social media platforms should be leveraged to share visually appealing content, recipes, and stories related to Khmer cuisine. Moreover,

Popularity of Khmer Foods: Possibility for a Successful Marketing Plan

organizing cultural events and food festivals that feature Khmer foods would provide hands-on experiences and tastings, fostering a deeper connection with the culinary tradition. Collaborations with local restaurants and chefs can play a pivotal role, encouraging the inclusion of Khmer dishes on menus and facilitating fusion creations that appeal to diverse palates. Online resources, such as dedicated platforms and websites, should be developed to offer comprehensive information about Khmer foods, making it easily accessible to a wider audience. Community engagement programs that involve residents in the preservation and promotion of Khmer culinary traditions would not only enhance local appreciation but also contribute to cultural richness. Furthermore, partnerships with tourism initiatives can highlight Khmer culinary experiences in tourism packages, attracting visitors interested in exploring the local cuisine. Gathering continuous feedback from the surveyed population is essential to understanding evolving preferences and tailoring promotional efforts accordingly. By implementing these recommendations, there is a potential to increase awareness, appreciation, and understanding of Khmer cuisine, contributing to the cultural diversity and richness of the culinary landscape. Additionally, fostering a deeper connection with Khmer foods can promote cultural exchange, encourage tourism, and strengthen the community's ties to its culinary heritage.

2. To elevate the appeal and recognition of Khmer cuisine, several recommendations emerge from the factors influencing individuals' interest in Khmer foods. Firstly, there is a need for continuous exploration and development of diverse Khmer dishes and ingredients to uphold and expand the current interest in the cuisine's diversity, as noted by 64.3% of respondents. Collaborative efforts with chefs could fuel innovation and revitalization of lesser-known recipes. Additionally, organizing culinary events and tasting experiences that showcase the unique flavors and tastes of Khmer foods can engage both local residents and tourists, fostering a deeper connection with the cuisine. Cultural promotion initiatives emphasizing the rich heritage and cultural appeal of Khmer foods should be implemented, potentially involving partnerships with cultural organizations, museums, and heritage sites to create immersive experiences. Integrating historical and cultural narratives into promotional materials, both online and offline, could enhance the narrative surrounding Khmer cuisine. Leveraging social media platforms for targeted digital marketing campaigns, engaging influencers, and collaborating with food bloggers to create visually appealing content can extend the reach of the cuisine to a broader audience. Collaborating with influencers, food critics, and culinary experts for tastings, reviews, and endorsements can significantly impact consumer perceptions. Offering cooking classes and culinary workshops to the public can provide hands-on experiences with Khmer recipes, demystifying the cuisine and empowering individuals to recreate these dishes at home. Collaborating with tourism boards to position Khmer cuisine as a significant element of culinary tourism, developing guided culinary tours, food trails, and immersive dining experiences, can highlight the unique aspects of Khmer foods. Lastly, fostering collaborations with chefs and culinary experts from different cultural backgrounds to create fusion dishes incorporating Khmer flavors can attract a diverse audience and contribute to the global appeal of Khmer cuisine. These recommendations collectively aim to celebrate and promote the richness of Khmer culinary heritage.

3. To fortify and perpetuate the burgeoning popularity of Khmer foods among Generation Z, several strategic recommendations emerge from the identified contributing factors. Firstly, there is a pressing need to bolster local Cambodian restaurants and food establishments through supportive initiatives and targeted promotion. Collaborative efforts with business associations, coupled with marketing campaigns and events spotlighting the diverse and authentic nature of Khmer cuisine, can significantly enhance visibility and patronage. Secondly, nurturing collaborations with renowned chefs and culinary experts on the international stage is crucial. Initiatives such as organizing culinary events, creating collaborative menus, and securing media features can amplify the profile of Khmer cuisine, capturing the attention and interest of Generation Z within the broader global culinary landscape. Moreover, providing opportunities for Generation Z to partake in global culinary experiences, including international food festivals and events, is paramount. This exposure not only broadens their culinary perspectives but also fosters an appreciation for Khmer foods in a global context. Enhancing culinary tourism initiatives, such as wellcurated food festivals and immersive culinary tours in Cambodia, should be a priority. These initiatives offer both locals and visitors a chance to explore and savor the richness of Khmer foods within their cultural milieu. Leveraging online platforms and engaging influencers, food bloggers, and culinary enthusiasts can be a powerful tool. Encouraging them to share their experiences with Khmer foods through visually appealing content can extend the reach and generate enthusiasm among a broader audience. Education and awareness-building initiatives, including cooking classes, workshops, and cultural exchange programs, need to be integrated into schools and communities. These efforts aim to instill a sense of pride and appreciation for the local culinary heritage among the younger generation. Furthermore, organizing collaborative events and cultural celebrations that bring together local Cambodian restaurants, chefs, and the community can be instrumental.

These gatherings serve as platforms to showcase Khmer foods, fostering a sense of community pride and engagement. Encouraging local restaurants to innovate their menus by incorporating traditional Khmer dishes alongside modern interpretations is key. Implementing promotional campaigns to highlight these new offerings can capture the curiosity and interest of Generation Z. Establishing partnerships with culinary schools to integrate Khmer cuisine into their curricula ensures the continued evolution

Popularity of Khmer Foods: Possibility for a Successful Marketing Plan

and representation of Khmer foods in the culinary world. This educational collaboration contributes to the training of aspiring chefs and culinary enthusiasts. Lastly, fostering a sense of community involvement and ownership is crucial. Encouraging local residents to actively participate in the promotion and celebration of Khmer foods through community-driven initiatives amplifies the cultural significance and authenticity of Khmer cuisine. By adopting these recommendations, there exists an opportunity to cultivate a sustained and growing interest in Khmer foods, ensuring their enduring popularity among Generation Z both locally and globally.

To further promote Khmer Foods on the global stage, a comprehensive marketing strategy is essential. Here are several key strategies that can be employed:

Digital Marketing and Social Media Campaigns:

- Utilize social media platforms to showcase visually appealing content, including high-quality images and videos of Khmer dishes.
- Engage influencers and food bloggers to create and share content that highlights the unique flavors, ingredients, and cultural aspects of Khmer cuisine.
- Leverage social media advertising to target global audiences interested in diverse and authentic culinary experiences.

Online Platforms and Culinary Websites:

- Develop a dedicated website or utilize existing culinary platforms to provide comprehensive information about Khmer Foods, including recipes, cooking techniques, and cultural significance.
- Collaborate with popular culinary websites to feature Khmer dishes, fostering a wider online presence and reaching diverse audiences.

Culinary Tourism Initiatives:

- Partner with tourism boards to position Khmer cuisine as a significant element of culinary tourism.
- Develop guided culinary tours, food trails, and immersive dining experiences to attract tourists interested in exploring local flavors.

International Food Festivals and Events:

- Participate in international food festivals and culinary events to showcase Khmer Foods to a global audience. This exposure can generate interest, build awareness, and create networking opportunities.

Collaborations with Renowned Chefs:

- Collaborate with renowned chefs and culinary experts from different parts of the world. This can involve joint cooking events, collaborative menus, and endorsements to elevate the profile of Khmer cuisine on the global culinary stage.

Educational Initiatives and Workshops:

- Organize cooking classes, workshops, and educational initiatives in key international culinary hubs. This not only introduces Khmer cuisine to aspiring chefs but also enhances awareness among culinary professionals.

Cross-Cultural Collaborations:

- Foster collaborations with chefs from other culinary traditions to create fusion dishes that incorporate Khmer flavors. This can attract a diverse audience and create a bridge between Khmer cuisine and other global culinary trends.

Strategic Partnerships with Restaurants and Food Chains:

- Establish partnerships with international restaurants and food chains to feature Khmer dishes on their menus. This expands the reach of Khmer cuisine to a wider audience and encourages global integration.

Promotional Materials and Culinary Shows:

- Create visually appealing promotional materials, including brochures, videos, and documentaries, to highlight the uniqueness of Khmer Foods. Distribute these materials at international trade fairs, culinary shows, and events.

Government and Diplomatic Initiatives:

- Seek support from diplomatic channels to promote Khmer cuisine during international events and gatherings. Government endorsements and collaborations can add credibility and recognition on the global stage.

Online Cooking Classes and Culinary Demonstrations:

- Offer online cooking classes and live culinary demonstrations, reaching a global audience interested in learning and experiencing Khmer cooking techniques and recipes.

Brand Ambassadors and Celebrity Endorsements:

- Appoint brand ambassadors or seek celebrity endorsements to create buzz around Khmer Foods. This can enhance the perceived value and desirability of Khmer cuisine in the eyes of a global audience.

Popularity of Khmer Foods: Possibility for a Successful Marketing Plan

By integrating these marketing strategies, there is an opportunity to not only promote Khmer Foods globally but also foster a deeper appreciation for the rich culinary heritage of Cambodia on the international stage.

REFERENCES

- 1) Cambodia Tradition and Culture. Retrieved from <https://angkorfocus.com/cambodia-information/cambodia-tradition-culture.html>.
- 2) Caselato-Sousa, V.M.; Amaya-Farfan, J. State of knowledge on amaranth grain: A comprehensive review. *J. Food Sci.* 2012, 77, R93–R104.
- 3) Coe, R., Waring, M., Hedges, L. V., & Arthur, J. (2017). Research methods and methodologies in education. *Sage*.
- 4) Grasee, D. (2023). State Terror and Long-Run Development: The Persistence of the Khmer Rouge. *American Political Science Review*, 1-18. doi:10.1017/S0003055423000382.
- 5) Hermann, M. The impact of the European Novel Food Regulation on trade and food innovation based on traditional plant foods from developing countries. *Food Policy* 2009, 34, 499– 507.
- 6) Johnson, I., Williamson, G., Eds.; Woodhead Publishing: Cambridge, UK, 2003; pp. 222–237.
- 7) Keng Dam, A. 2023. *The New Gastronome Sugar, Spice, and Everything Rice*. <https://thenewgastronome.com/sugar-spice-andeverything-rice/>
- 8) Lindsay, D. Testing the safety of phytochemicals. In *Phytochemical Functional Foods*, 1st ed.;
- 9) Rahuldev Rajguru.2022. *15 Delicious Cambodian Foods You Must Try*. Retrieved from <https://turuhi.com/resources/delicious-cambodian-foods-you-must-try/>
- 10) Trichopoulou, A.; Soukara, S.; Vasilopoulou, E. Traditional foods: A science and society perspective. *Trends Food Sci. Technol.* 2007, 18, 420–427.
- 11) Veneracion, C. (2021). *How To Make Kroeung: Cambodian Marinade and Spice Paste*. Retrieved March 20, 2021, from <https://www.thespruceeats.com/kroeung-cambodian-marinade-spicepaste-3030372>



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.