

Research Article



***Not Simple Temple Food:
Thai Community-Making In The United States***

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Abstract: This essay explores Thai Buddhist food practices in relation to community building in the United States. Drawing from interviews, participant observation, and online research, I examine two interconnected issues. First, how temple food practices—offering alms to monks and operating newly invented temple food courts—sustain temples spiritually and financially. Second, how temple food, which is consistently integrated into various events and rituals, enables Thai Americans and a diverse assortment of other participants to connect and work together. This inquiry sheds light on the meanings invested in temple food, and the religious and socio-economic importance of food for Theravada Buddhist community building.

Keywords: Thai Theravada Buddhism; community building; offering alms; food court; identity

The meals are a place where religious identity is shaped, community is built, and memories are created. They may not be religious, but they're not just another meal (Sack 2000: 62).

Food plays a crucial role in the creation and maintenance of religious institutions, whether a Hindu *mandir*, Christian church, Muslim mosque, Jewish synagogue, Chinese Mahayana temple, or Thai Theravada temple (Dodson and Gilkes 1995; Finch 2010; Zeller, Dallam, Neilson, and Rubel 2014). In her book *Food in the Social Order*, Mary Douglas points out that “Food is a field of action. It is a medium in which other levels of categorization become manifest. It does not lead or follow, but it squarely belongs to whatever action there is” (Douglas 1984: 30). Indeed, food intimately intertwines with Buddhist practices irrespective of the locale. In Thailand, women, especially, use their knowledge of food to enhance their practice of Buddhism (Van Esterik 1986). At Thai temples in the United States, preparing, offering, sharing, and consuming food are part of what Thai Buddhist communities do and what they hope their communities will become. Food is far-reaching, for it is not only central in revealing who we are but also in conveying consumption patterns and underlying political economies (Belasco 2002).

Offering alms is a key Theravada Buddhist practice. Practitioners make offerings—food, robes, rice, medicine, daily necessities, and money—to monks throughout the year.

Offering alms is rooted within the notion of “merit making” that transforms economic capital into religious capital.¹ Accepting food offerings is one of the ways monks practice Buddhism, as the monastic moral code prohibits them from cooking their own meals.

This centuries-old practice has been reshaped by transnational migration and the transplantation of Buddhism in the United States. In Thailand, Buddhists can offer alms to monastics every morning, as there are over thirty thousand temples in a country about twice the size of Wyoming with a population of sixty-eight million. Temple-goers, especially in urban areas, can buy prepackaged alms baskets to offer monks. However, in the United States, monks do not conduct alms rounds in their neighborhood at dawn as they do in Thailand because this might be misunderstood as “begging.” To overcome this obstacle, community members set up a schedule and take turns offering alms food at the temple.² Some temples also operate a labor-intensive, time-consuming, volunteer-staffed “food court,” “food market,” or “food fair” on the temple grounds on the weekend (hereafter referred to as a food court).

These food courts are a product of American society; no such food court exists inside a Buddhist temple in Thailand. This innovation arose to meet the needs of temple communities in the United States: offering food to monastics to make merit, feeding participants, reproducing Thai identity, and, crucially, selling food to the public to raise money to support the temple. Food courts contribute to community building and contest the boundaries between the “sacred” and “mundane.” In this regard, the food court becomes a distinctive feature of Thai American Buddhist temples. Although the operation of food courts is still in its infancy and only practiced by some Thai American Buddhist temples,³ it is no less important than offering alms. Rather, the practice symbolizes a transformation of Thai Theravada Buddhism in the United States and demonstrates the creativity and flexibility of these temple communities.

Indeed, foodways—“all of the activities and meanings surrounding food in a particular cultural setting” (Finch 2010: 39)—provide a lens to study the relationship between religious food practices and the creation, maintenance, and transformation of the community. There is a dearth of knowledge about Asian American religious food practices in general,⁴ and Theravada Buddhist food practices in particular.⁵ The bulk of firsthand information about Thai temple food courts has been observed and documented by journalists. Newspapers in California have reported the phenomenon of these food courts, describing the dishes available, volunteer cooks, food culture, cost of meals, as well as details about a temple’s physical space (Pham 2002; Sung 2001; Tran 2002). When Thai Buddhist temples in Los Angeles and Berkeley encountered complaints

1 Merit making is the most important religious practice among Theravada Buddhists in Thailand (Van Esterik 1986: 198).

2 Cambodian, Laotian, Burmese, and Sri Lankan Americans do this at their temples too.

3 The ability to operate a food court is contingent upon a temple’s having sufficient resources, capable leadership, a use permit, dedicated volunteers, as well as acceptance from the neighbors. In addition, a large space, preferably outdoors, is required.

4 This was independently noted by religious studies scholars Marie Dallam (2014: xxiii) and Martha Finch (2010: 42).

5 Until now there has not been not a single article or book chapter focusing on Theravada Buddhist food practices in the United States.

and resistance from the neighbors, there were timely articles about it (Bhattacharjee 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; 2009; Burum 2009; Fowler 2009; Markel 1983; Schoch 2007; Swan 2009). In comparison, academic and popular literature on mindful eating is noted for focusing on middle-class white American women interested in weight loss, health, personal happiness, and spiritual growth (Wilson 2014a; 2014b; 2016). As a result, many Americans are not aware of the religious and cultural meanings invested in temple food and the relationship between food and community building.⁶

While nothing brings people from all walks of life together like food, food has been taken for granted. This essay explores Thai Theravada religious food practices in relation to community building in the United States. I examine two interconnected issues. First, how temple food practices—alms offerings and temple food courts—sustain temples spiritually and financially. Second, how temple food, which is integrated into all temple events, enables Thai Americans and a diverse assortment of other participants to connect with one another and work together.

This essay draws upon interviews and participant observation I conducted at several Buddhist temples, including Wat Thai of Silicon Valley, where I have studied the formation of the temple community for over a decade.⁷ To capture the big picture of Thai American temple food practices, I made use of temple websites.⁸ Wat Mongkolratanaram in Tampa, Florida, and Wat Phrasiratanaram in Florissant, Missouri, are unique in posting detailed food court information on their websites. Information presented here regarding temple food also benefitted from newspapers, alternative newsweeklies, and social networking sites such as Yelp, Chowhound, and Facebook. They provided valuable information such as the hours of operation, available dishes, drinks, and desserts, as well as a wide range of comments about particular food courts, Thai identity, volunteers, and the temple environment. In the following section, I begin with a brief discussion about the intertwining relationships among Thai immigrants, Thai restaurants, and Buddhist temples in the initial stages of forming a temple community.

First Thai Restaurants, Then Thai Temples

There were no Thai restaurants in the United States before the late 1960s, in part due to the small number of Thai immigrants. According to census data, there were fewer than five hundred Thais living in the United States in 1960.⁹ Things have changed. Over a recent twenty-year period (1990–2010), the Thai population in the United States increased by more than 160 percent (Table 1).

6 Once a white American English-language teacher asked a Thai monk at Wat Thai of Silicon Valley, “Why do monks live off of *charity* by accepting food from the public?”

7 “Wat Thai of Silicon Valley” is a pseudonym. Unless published elsewhere, for example, in a newspaper article or online Yelp review, the names of informants are also pseudonyms.

8 This approach proved more challenging than I anticipated: some temples have no website; some websites are maintained by volunteers who come and go. Other temple websites post only minimal information about the food court and the dishes available. In addition, some temple food courts are provisional. Therefore, it is difficult to come up with even an approximate number of Thai Buddhist temple food courts in the United States.

9 Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1984 Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), 4.

Year	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
Number of Thai Americans	458	5,256	45,279	91,360	150,283	237,583

Table 1 Thai American Population in the United States¹⁰

With the growth of the Thai American population and the increasing popularity of Thai food, today one can find Thai fish sauce, basil, and lemongrass in major American grocery stores. There are approximately five thousand to six thousand Thai restaurants¹¹ spread across all fifty states: from North Pole, Alaska, to Honolulu, Hawaii; from San Diego, California, to Bangor, Maine.¹²

In a typical city, Thai restaurants are established before the first Thai Buddhist temple. In Los Angeles, the first Thai restaurant opened in 1969 and the first Thai grocery store in 1971, but it was not until 1972 that the first Thai temple in the United States, Wat Thai of Los Angeles, was founded (Andrews 1990; Perreira 2010: 565). The first Thai restaurant in Las Vegas opened in 1973, but it took until 1986 for the first Thai Buddhist temple to be established. Thus, when there are Thai immigrants in a cosmopolitan city, there will be Thai restaurants; and when there are Thai restaurants, there will be a Thai temple.

Thai restaurant owners often are involved in setting up Thai American Buddhist temples. Mr. Pramort Tila, who opened the first Thai grocery store in the United States, the Bangkok Market in Hollywood, California, served as vice president of Wat Thai of Los Angeles (Andrews 1990). Many Thai restaurant owners confirm historian Donna Gabaccia's insight: immigrant businessmen and women in the United States "carried ethnicity with them," and, consequently, their "ethnic food" is no longer "confined to enclave economies" (Gabaccia 1998: 120). The restaurant owners sell food within and outside their ethnic enclave. In addition, their economic resources and personal networks are crucial, especially in the initial stages of establishing a new Buddhist temple. Some restaurant owners regularly provide food to newly arrived Thai monks. The close connection between restaurants and temples shed light on the importance of food and the economic resources necessary to build a Buddhist temple. Today there are about 160 Thai Buddhist temples in the United States.¹³

10 Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1984 Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), 4; U.S. Census Bureau, 1980 Census of Population, vol. 2, subject reports, PC80-2-1E, Asian and Pacific Islander Population in the United States, January 1988; U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 Census of Population, Asian and Pacific Islanders in the United States, August 1993, Table 1: General Characteristics of Selected Asian and Pacific Islander Groups by Nativity, Citizenship, and Year of Entry, 1990; U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000, Demographic Profile Highlights, using American Fact Finder, <http://factfinder.census.gov> (Accessed July 22, 2012); U.S. Census Bureau, Asian Population: 2010, Census Briefs, Table 6: Asian Population by Detailed Group: 2000 and 2010, 14, <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-11.pdf> (Accessed July 22, 2012).

11 See http://www.manta.com/mb_35_C432C037_000/thai_restaurant and <http://thaicuisine.com/list.html> [Online]. Accessed September 7, 2016.

12 See <http://thaicuisine.com/> [Online]. Accessed August 18, 2016.

13 As of March 2014, 162 Thai American Buddhist temples were recognized by the Council of the Thai Bhikkhus in the United States and monastic authorities in Thailand.

In the next section I discuss the emerging phenomenon of food courts, the transformation of Thai food, and the association of temple food with “authenticity.” I then explore the ways in which temple food serves as a special ingredient for community making: facilitating merit making, spiritual practices, and inclusion, as well as fundraising.

The Emergence of the Temple Food Court in the United States

Establishing a food court and modifying the rules of its operation are part of the process of temple formation. Usually a food court arises not at the outset but a few years after a temple is founded. For example, Wat Thai of Los Angeles launched its food court seven years after the founding of its temple; its food court was initially located in the basement. According to a 1984 zoning document, Wat Thai of Los Angeles was only allowed to hold “four special events” a year, and have no “more than 160 visitors at a time” (Schoch 2007). However, the food court now operates every Saturday and Sunday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and serves hundreds of patrons.¹⁴ Another example, Wat Thai of Silicon Valley, founded in 1983, took even longer to establish a food court. In 1988, the abbot of Wat Thai of Silicon Valley permitted a woman who had lost her job to sell snacks to temple school students and visitors, helping her get back on her feet financially. Later, this expanded to a group of women selling food.¹⁵ In 2002, as money was needed to support the temple school, the board of directors decided that only volunteers who donated all profit to the temple could sell at the food court.

Food courts contribute to the growth of a temple community by attracting visitors from all walks of life. Wat Mongkolratanaram, also known as the Berkeley Temple, had perhaps a few dozen visitors each Sunday in the 1980s. When they added a food court, this rose to as many as four hundred or five hundred by 2002 (Pham 2002). As of 2017, even more people eat there. During the Thai New Year celebration, the food courts and food stands at some temples I observed attracted large crowds, sometimes more than a thousand people (see figure 1). Tasting temple food is perceived by many, both Thais and non-Thais, as tasting Thai culture.

Generally speaking, the dining space is arranged in response to local preferences and the temple setting.¹⁶ For example, eating outdoors is appealing. Tables and chairs are often placed under big trees and/or white awnings. Wat Tampa in Florida takes advantage of their surroundings and sets up picnic tables and chairs next to the waterfront. At Wat Thai of Los Angeles, the Berkeley Temple, and Wat Thai of Silicon Valley, as well as Chaiyan Meditation Center in Las Vegas, the food court is located close to the main hall due to space constraints. The fragrance of incense and the aroma of food against a backdrop of Buddhist architecture create a convivial atmosphere.

14 To the best of my knowledge, the food court at Wat Thai of Los Angeles is the only one regularly open two days a week. Temple food courts tend to operate on Sundays. Some are open once a week; others once a month; still others several times a year to coincide with Buddhist festivals and ceremonies.

15 They paid twenty-five dollars a month for access to the facilities and donated the money they made at big community events.

16 In writing about “Tasting an Imagined Thailand” Jennie Molz also noted that the arrangement of space within Thai restaurants is informed by local customers’ taste (2005).



Figure 1: Eating outdoors (photograph by the author, 2009)

While some regard temple food as an opportunity to sample “authentic” Thai dishes, others, as reported by journalists Riya Bhattacharjee and Julie T. Tran, see a food court as an “underground” venture exploiting a loophole to make money and thus at odds with the religious intent of a Buddhist temple (Bhattacharjee 2008a; Tran 2002). Indeed, food courts and discourses about food courts are value-laden and informed by ideologies. In 2008, some neighbors of the Berkeley Temple petitioned the city to close the food court, accusing the temple of running “a commercial restaurant” in a residential zone (Bhattacharjee 2008a) and complaining that “they couldn’t stand ‘offensive odors’ of Thai food being prepared” (Fowler 2009). In response, the temple issued a statement: its food court “posed no detriment to the health, safety, peace, morals, comfort and general welfare of the neighborhood.”¹⁷ To keep the Berkeley Temple food court open, second-generation Thai Americans launched an outreach campaign (Lee 2015: 134–139). Apai, a college student, Buddhist practitioner, and activist pointed out that “The Sunday food services are essential to the Buddhist religious practice of communal food-sharing aspect of contributing to and receiving Buddhist merit” (August 3, 2009, personal email). He and others collected 2,700 signatures supporting the food court. In 2009, the Berkeley Zoning Adjustments Board decided to allow the temple food court to remain open, declaring it to be “an asset to the city” (Bhattacharjee 2009).¹⁸ The food court survived and now is sometimes referred to as a “hidden little gem in South Berkeley.”¹⁹

17 “Save the Thai Temple” press release, November 7, 2008.

18 To get along better with the neighbors, they reduced the noise and smells by cooking indoors, banning fried food, and cutting service hours (Bhattacharjee 2008a; 2009).

19 Sherry C. Posted 4/17/2016. Yelp. “Recommended Reviews for Wat Mongkolratanaram,” [Online]. Available at: <https://www.yelp.com/biz/wat-mongkolratanaram-berkeley>. Accessed September 30, 2016.

The food court also conforms with the conventional gendered division of labor. At Wat Thai of Silicon Valley, women do most of the preparation and the cooking (see figure 2), whereas the men, including the monks, do all the heavy lifting—emptying the trash cans, taking down the awnings, rearranging tables and chairs. Andy Huse captures the gendered division of labor at Wat Tampa in Florida: “Thai ladies cook and serve most of the entrees, soups, and desserts; Thai men convene around the grill and frying woks; and the Yankees—unmistakably American ex-G.I.s who married Thais—sell the drinks and bottled water” (Huse 2009). Similar gendered arrangements can be found at other Buddhist temples and meditation centers in the United States (Cadge 2005: 187–188; Padoongpatt 2011: 96; Suh 2004: 82).



Figure 2: Preparing food (photograph by the author, 2012)

Thai food and food court space are inscribed with heterogeneous meanings by volunteers, patrons, and neighbors; each speaks from different positions. Space is physically, materially, and culturally constructed (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 17; Harvey 1993: 25–28; Liechty 2003: 21, 255; Somekawa 1995: 46; Yaeger 1996: 4). Likewise, food court space is shaped by both Thai and American norms and taste.

Food, Change, and Authenticity

Based on a survey of fourteen Thai American Buddhist temples,²⁰ the number and kind of dishes available varies substantially. Curry dishes include red curry, green curry, yellow curry, Panang curry, and Massaman curry, all of which can be made with pork, chicken, fish, and assorted vegetables. Meat dishes include deep-fried or barbequed chicken, beef sausage, pork jerky, braised pork leg, *laab* (meat salad) and so on. In addition, there are a wide range of rice dishes, soups, noodles, salads, and desserts. Taking a closer look at the more than two hundred different dishes consumed at these fourteen temples, we find that Thai tea, *som tum* (green papaya salad), pad thai (stir-fried rice noodles), and *khanom krock* (coconut pudding) are among the most popular fare.

Penny Van Esterik, who has written extensively about Thai food, points out that “[t]here is a recognizable Thai taste: the combination of fish sauce, lemon grass, lime, coriander, ginger or galingale, garlic, sweet Thai basil, mint, and chili peppers in a harmonious blend” (Van Esterik 1992: 187). Thai food—from complicated curries to simple hot sauces—is made by combining five primary flavors: sweet, sour, salty, spicy, and bitter. Some dishes capture regional and ethnic variations due to different cooking styles, ingredients, and spices.

Despite this, Thai foodways have always been fluid in Thailand. Chulanee Thianthai notes that globalization and Western food have had a great impact on what residents of different ages and genders eat in Bangkok (Thianthai 2003: 11, 13). Van Esterik observes that the Bangkok middle class modified Thai cuisine “by reducing the chili pepper and increasing the sugar, and ignored other dishes such as fermented fish and insects” (Van Esterik 1992: 183). Thai leaders also have modified Thai dishes to articulate Thai national identity. Take *kway teo*, for example. Chinese migrants introduced these rice noodles to Thailand.²¹ It is eaten for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and as a snack. In the 1940s, Thailand’s prime minister Phibun Songkram reconfigured *kway teo* and named it “pad thai” as part of his campaign for advancing Thai-ness, a healthy diet, and a stronger national economy (Greeley 2009: 78–80). With such a remaking, pad thai flavored with Thai fermented fish sauce, lime, chilli, and palm sugar now enjoys its status as *the* iconic Thai dish in the United States.²²

In adjusting to the American palate, Thai food tends to be made less spicy and a bit sweeter than in Thailand.²³ The amount of fish sauce, a key ingredient in Thai cooking, is reduced and sometimes replaced with salt or soy sauce. Fresh curry may be

20 The fourteen temples include the following: Wat Mongkolratanaram (Tampa, FL), Buddhist Center of Dallas (Dallas, TX), Wat Buddhapradeep (San Bruno, CA), Buddhist Temple of Hawaii (Pearl City, HI), Wat Thai of Los Angeles (North Hollywood, CA), Wat Mongkolratanaram (Berkeley, CA), Wat Phrasriratanaram (Florissant, MO), Midwest Buddhist Meditation Center (Warren, MI), Wat Sacramento Buddhavanaram (Sacramento, CA), Wat Buddhanusorn (Fremont, CA), Wat Dhammaram (Chicago, IL), Wat Thai Washington D.C. (Silver Spring, MD), Wat Buddhawaram (Denver, CO), and Wat Vajiradhammapadip (Centereach, NY).

21 Kasma Loha-unchit. Posted 11/2009. “Thai Food and Travel Blog,” [Online]. Available at: <http://thaifoodandtravel.com/blog/pad-thai>. Accessed February 29, 2016.

22 Something very similar happened in Italy. Marco Polo introduced noodles from China into Italy. Over time, spaghetti became the symbol of Italian cuisine and its Chinese origin was largely forgotten (Bell and Valentine 1997: 10).

23 In writing about the growth of Thai restaurants in Australia, Caterina Embersic and John Connell note that Thai food in Sydney becomes “blandier” and “more Australian” (Embersic and Connell 2002: 284).

substituted with instant curry, which has a milder flavor and takes less time to prepare. The amount and kinds of herbs are also reduced due to the cost and lack of availability. Food, like the cooks themselves, is subject to adaptation, change, and invention.

Although Thai dishes have been continuously modified, temple food is associated with Thai identity; both Thais and non-Thais associate temple food with “authenticity.” Many, including influential food critic Jonathan Gold, claim that some Thai temple food is more authentic than what is found in local Thai restaurants (Huse 2009; Schoch 2007; Tran 2002). Comments such as the following are not rare on Yelp: “The Food: Authentic, generously-portioned, cheap & delicious. I felt I couldn’t get any more authentic.”²⁴ As another person puts it: “Nothing like authentic Thai food at the Buddhist temple...I’m not Buddhist but thank you Buddha for the delicious blessings.”²⁵ Indeed, certain temple dishes are like street food prepared from family recipes. But this is certainly not always the case. Some cook at the temple on the weekend and at Thai restaurants during the week (Reitz 2015). Sometimes the dishes are identical, but having the food court within the temple complex influences the diners’ perception of the food.

A deep-seated assumption is that temple food is “real” Thai food. Sumana Barua, event coordinator for Wat Thai of Los Angeles, said “We want to promote Thai culture so, of course, we want people to try authentic Thai food. It doesn’t matter what religion you are—contentment in the stomach is No. 1” (Sung 2001). Sumana equated “promot[ing] Thai culture” to “authentic Thai food.” This reminds us that pad thai was invented to promote Thai national identity and advance the Thai national economy (Greeley 2009). Food, identities, culture, consumption, and the market economy are deeply interconnected (Diner 2001; Dodson and Gilkes 1995; Finch 2006; 2010; Gabaccia 1998; Jory 1999; McClymond 2006; Van Esterik 1984; 1992). Foodways serve as a vehicle to convey religious, cultural, ethnic and/or national identities (Fischler 1988; Harvey 2013: 2; Hicks 2014; Kearney and Taylor 2011; Lockwood and Lockwood 2000: 536–538; McLellan 1998). Such identities are often informed by economic interests, marketing strategies, and financial need.

Offering Alms Food

Alms food is at the heart of Theravada Buddhist religious food practices. The monastics depend upon these offerings theologically and materially. Eating alms food, whatever people give, helps monks cultivate detachment from desiring certain foods and practice mindfulness. Alms food is also believed to be transformed into merit for the almsgiver as Theravada monks are considered a “field of merit”—“a rich soil in which to ‘plant’ one’s good deed” (Ohnuma 2005: 107). An alms giver would say “thank you” to the monk, but a monk does not need to say “thank you” in return.

Offering alms, therefore, is one major configuration of merit making. Thai American Buddhist temples typically schedule one big communal event every month that includes

24 Dessa R. Posted 1/4/2016. Yelp. “Recommended Reviews for Wat Buddhapradeep of San Francisco,” [Online]. Available at: <https://www.yelp.com/biz/wat-buddhapradeep-of-san-francisco-san-bruno>. Accessed August 3, 2017.

25 Jane A. Posted 12/13/2015. Yelp. “Recommended Reviews for Wat Thai Temple,” [Online]. Available at: <https://www.yelp.com/biz/wat-thai-temple-north-hollywood-2?osq=Wat+Thai+of+Los+Angeles+%28North+Hollywood%2C+CA%29%2C>. Accessed August 4, 2017.

alms offerings such as commemorating the day the Buddha passed away, the celebration of the beginning and the end of Buddhist Lent, or celebrating Thai New Year. For example, at monthly events, the monastics of Wat Thai of Silicon Valley hold a symbolic alms round.²⁶ Each monk carries an alms bowl and walks barefoot. Participants line up to give offerings. When the bowl is full, the monk empties it into a basket carried by a lay man following behind the monk; this continues until everyone has had a chance to make an offering (see figure 3).



Figure 3: Offering and receiving alms at a community event (photograph by the author, 2004)

Giving and receiving alms food is informed by a reciprocal relationship (Kieschnick 2003; Lopez 2001; Spiro 1966; Tambiah 1970). Offering alms is perceived as a way to accumulate positive karma by doing good things. Karma is conceived of as the sum of the merits and demerits one has accumulated in this and all previous lives (Keyes 1987: 224; Smith-Hefner 1999: 13; Spiro 1966: 1167; Tambiah 1970: 53). Through giving, participants gain hope that family problems may be solved; volunteers who prepare food feel rewarded as the temple community prospers.

For some, however, alms giving is more than a simple exchange. Take three women I know at Wat Thai of Silicon Valley, for example. For over fifteen years these women have come to the temple every Wednesday to offer alms. Each prepares and brings a feast of delectable homemade main dishes, desserts, and seasonal fruit. Each piece of fruit is cut neatly; all seeds are removed. These women offer far more food than the monks can possibly eat so that the leftovers can feed the other volunteers and temple

²⁶ Participants may buy offering items such as canned food, fruit, flowers, robes, and other prepackaged goods sold at the temple.

visitors that day. They provide two communal meals: one for the monastics and one for the lay volunteers. By doing this, these three women accumulate merit and convey their commitment to the community. Ordinary women do an extraordinary job serving the temple community via food. These women can be seen as the embodiment of temple community builders.

To adjust to the new environment in the United States, alms offerings have been reconfigured. When Wat Thai of Silicon Valley had only a few dozen members, everyone was welcome to offer food to the monks. Nowadays, however, as the number of temple visitors has grown—and especially at big events—the monks cannot possibly consume the food people wish to give. The solution? Canned food, which the monks seldom eat, is sold at the temple because it can be easily stored and resold as a symbolic offering over and over again. Such a reconfiguration not only makes offering alms much easier, it also includes non-Buddhists who want to participate in community events.

In addition to community events, life cycle rituals such as birthdays, weddings, funerals, and death anniversaries include alms giving. At these rituals, the monks not only “transfer merit” but also give blessings. They provide followers with a sense of belonging, emotional comfort, and reassurance. At these rituals, how the offerings are made may differ slightly. For birthday rituals, some individuals offer alms to monks at the temple. Others invite monks to their home or a restaurant to offer alms. Offerings tend to be on a larger scale and more extravagant for weddings. Watermelon and honeydew melons are carved into the shape of flowers or birds to decorate the main dining table. In contrast, food offered at funerals and death anniversaries may include the favorite dishes of the deceased. These foods and the manner in which they are offered are meaningful to the individual participants. The interactions between participants and monks strengthen social bonds and enhance Buddhist faith.

Spiritual Practices at the Food Court

There are multiple paths for spiritual development. For some, doing whatever the temple needs is a path for achieving serenity. For others, meditating or chanting or being mindful about everything one does is practicing spirituality. For still others, donating time, skills, or money is a form of seeking happiness.

These paths may look different, but all are underscored by generosity and compassion. For years, Kesinee, a breast cancer survivor, donated money to fund student education at the abbot’s home village in Thailand to make merit. After her surgery, she continued cooking at the food court: “When I work here, I do not think too much. But when I stay at home, I worry too much,” she said. She has volunteered at the food court every Sunday for more than twenty years. One of her friends, Suwanna, also volunteered at the food court after her husband died. Suwanna joined in what she called “marathon cooking” to work through her grief and ward off loneliness. (She also donated 5.5 million baht to renovate the abbot’s home village temple to make merit for her deceased husband and other family members.²⁷) Giving back to the community and interacting with others made Kesinee and Suwanna feel happy.

²⁷ Over the past thirty years, the exchange rate has fluctuated between 20 to 35 baht to the U.S. dollar.



Figure 4: Monks setting up a tent for the food court (photograph by the author, 2006)

Thai monks, too, have engaged in many facets of community life, including supporting the operation of a food court. At Wat Thai of Silicon Valley, monks help prepare food for communal events behind the scenes. One monk may be in charge of shopping for supplies for the food court; another monk, soaking and steaming rice at 6 a.m.; and another may be in charge of cleaning the dining tables before 7 a.m. Then they work together at tasks such as setting up tents at the food court (see figure 4). At dawn on April 10, 2009, I happened upon an unexpected sight at the food court: five monks were slicing papaya in preparation for celebrating Thai New Year.²⁸ Their action silently

²⁸ Another example: the abbot of Wat Thai Las Vegas told me that, after a big community event, he led his monks in making noodle soup for the lay volunteers to thank them for their hard work on behalf of the temple.

but powerfully epitomized the adaption and transformation of the Thai monastic community in the United States.

Moreover, a food court serves an ideal space for the community to collectively practice spiritual inclusion. At its food court, volunteers of different faiths and cultural backgrounds work together as a team, which reflects the breadth and diversity of the temple community.²⁹ For example, in 2011, a trio of men, Alan (Hispanic American), Leo (Chinese Filipino), and Jim (White American), formed a crew to cook Thai barbeque. Alan is Catholic but he volunteered to perform all kinds of work from directing traffic to selling soda at the food court. In our interview, he said “I still say I am a Catholic, but I do not remember the last time I visited my church. I am doing good things at a Buddhist temple.” Faith, for Alan, can be practiced anywhere; it is not restricted to a church. In 1985, he and his Thai wife offered to co-sign the loan when they learned that the temple did not have enough credit to purchase property so that they no longer needed to rent. Some participants like Alan, who cannot speak and does not look Thai, become core members of the community, valuable assets for the temple in communicating and connecting with the public.

Cooking and donating necessities including money may not appear to be spiritual, and yet these acts, which are conducted not just once but over many years, require compassion, generosity, and sacrifice. Such actions bond people together and contribute to collective interests, community well-being, and individual happiness.

Temple Food as Social Glue

Temple food, indeed, serves as “social glue” fostering a shared sense of community (Bell and Valentine 1997: 15). Wat Thai of Silicon Valley incorporates receptions, buffets, snacks, and banquets into social and cultural events. When military personnel who study the Thai language at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in Monterey, California, visited the temple, they were treated to temple food. Sharing food puts visitors at ease. Neighbors, too, are sometimes invited to the temple to a “thank you” party where Thai food is served. On Sunday, temple students are provided snacks during the morning break. Sharing food cultivates communal feelings.

Once a year these young students—who are seen as the future of the temple community—stage a performance of Thai dance and music. Classical Night, as it is called, is advertised as a “showcase of Thai culture” and claims to “strengthen the cultural bond” between Thai Americans and the United States.³⁰ The temple sells admission tickets to the public to raise funds for the school, and since food is always used as a medium at rituals and events, the program includes dinner with the show. Dining tables are arranged just a few feet from the stage so that the audience can watch the performances while enjoying the food. During breaks, raffle winners are announced.

29 According to the abbot, Wat Thai of Silicon Valley has approximately two thousand members including Asian migrants from Burma, Cambodia, China, India, Laos, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam, as well as a number of White Americans and a handful of Latinos and African Americans.

30 The temple’s Classical Night programs 2002–2007.

A Thai word for fun, *sanuk*, is frequently used to describe and express this feeling of joy and togetherness.

For many Thai immigrants, temple food reminds them of Thailand. “Coming here makes you want to go home, burn some incense and thank Buddha for building this sanctuary for good eats” said Hevad.³¹ Another Yelp reviewer posted: “I love this place. Being so far away from Thailand it is so nice to have the temple to visit to give me a sense of peace and bring me closer to home.”³² Eating familiar food, speaking their native language, and worshipping the Buddha, these Thai immigrants feel they have temporarily returned home.

Among diners who are not temple members, some are novelty seekers; some come just to eat good and inexpensive food; and some also participate in a community activity such as merit making.³³ Others come to spend time with friends. After a meal, a few walk around the temple grounds, and peek inside the chapel to take a look at the Thai architecture, Buddha statues, and murals. One may talk to a monk or a practitioner to find out more about the temple. Tricia commented on Yelp: “What a cool experience! Affordable, outside, fresh, and fun.”³⁴ Cathy wrote: “I love the unique setup here [the Berkeley Temple] which makes going an experience beyond just the food.”³⁵ Many would agree with Cathy that the experience of dining at a temple food court differs from the experience of dining at a Thai restaurant, a topic that other scholars have considered (Embersic and Connell 2002; Molz 2005; Yasmeen 1996; 2000). Such encounters even inspire a few to learn about Theravada Buddhism and join the community. Indeed, food as a field of action can bring people together.

A Source of Financial Support

Some temples directly embrace the food court for fundraising.³⁶ Chaiyan Meditation Center in Las Vegas, for example, burdened by a large mortgage, hosts monthly food fairs. On its website, the food fair schedule is posted and people are urged to attend: “Turn your Lunch into Donations... All funds go to the monastery’s mortgage payment... So every penny counts!!! Please come join us.”³⁷ It costs about ten dollars—five for a main

31 Hevad Y. Posted 9/15/2010. Yelp. “Review for Buddhansorn Thai Temple,” [Online]. Available at: <http://www.yelp.com/biz/buddhansorn-thai-temple-fremont>. Accessed June 4, 2012.

32 Sai K. Posted 1/17/2011. Yelp. “Review for Buddhansorn Thai Temple,” [Online]. Available at: <http://www.yelp.com/biz/buddhansorn-thai-temple-fremont>. Accessed June 4, 2012.

33 Some visitors, who had assumed that all Buddhists were vegetarians, experience culture shock. In fact, only a small number of Theravada monastics and lay people are vegetarian by choice; most eat meat but do not kill life. Some Mahayana Buddhist monastics and followers are vegetarians; others eat all meat except beef.

34 Tricia R. Posted 7/24/2016. Yelp. “Recommended Reviews for Wat Mongkolratanaram,” [Online]. Available at: <https://www.yelp.com/biz/wat-mongkolratanaram-berkeley>. Accessed September 28, 2016.

35 Cathy S. Posted 8/25/2016. Yelp. “Recommended Reviews for Wat Mongkolratanaram,” [Online]. Available at: <https://www.yelp.com/biz/wat-mongkolratanaram-berkeley>. Accessed September 28, 2016.

36 Thai American temples are under constant pressure to raise money. They do not receive any financial support from the government as they do in Thailand. Despite this, Thai temples still follow their custom of not charging a membership or participation fee for activities or events. Yet maintaining a temple; paying off the mortgage; conducting rituals; and teaching the dharma, meditation, and the Thai language requires money.

37 See “Welcome to our monthly food fair!” [Online]. Available at: <http://www.chaiyacmm.org/activities.html>. Accessed February 28, 2016.

dish, two for a beverage, and three for dessert—for lunch. In fact, Wat Chaiyan's food court was launched by a group of Thai Americans living in Los Angeles who had studied meditation with the abbot. For years, this group of Thai volunteers drove back and forth between Los Angeles and Las Vegas once a month to cook and help the new community raise money.

Wat Buddhometta in Tucson, Arizona, also organizes monthly food fairs but does it as a "Thai Food Buffet Dinner" instead of lunch. On the temple website, Ajahn Sarayut, the abbot, states:

The very best Thai cooks are preparing a wonderful buffet of Thai food including Pad Thai, egg rolls, vegetarian and chicken curries, dessert and more delights. No reservations required. Most items are wheat-free, gluten-free, and dairy-free. Bring the whole family and your friends. We are asking a small donation of \$10 per person; children under 10 eat free. The collected funds from this event help to support the temple to offer all classes free of charge to the community.³⁸

Here the meal is promoted as inexpensive, healthy, and suitable for consumption by people with food allergies. The abbot makes it absolutely clear that the money raised will be ploughed back into the community by supporting temple educational programs.

Some temple food courts raise substantial money. For example, about 75% of the Berkeley Temple's annual income comes from its food court (Fowler 2009).³⁹ Wat Thai of Silicon Valley also profited from its food court. In 2002, it netted about \$1,000–\$2,000 every Sunday; by 2010, this increased to about \$5,000 each Sunday as the food court attracted more and more people (Bao 2015: 105). Nevertheless, a few abbots and boards of directors have become concerned that the financial success of a food court might be regarded by the public as a money-making commercial enterprise and thus at odds with a Buddhist temple's non-profit religious essence. In 2009, John, a key member of a temple community, posted a statement on Yelp to remind patrons that a Buddhist temple food court "is NOT a restaurant"; diners were urged to be aware that the cooks were volunteers and they tried to "bring families, friends, and strangers together and raise money to support the temple."⁴⁰ The organizers of temple food courts walk a tightrope between needing to raise money to sustain their communities, and conforming to the image of a Buddhist temple as a sanctuary detached from the material world.

38 See "Wat Buddhometta," [Online]. Available at: <http://tucsonbuddhistcenter.org/buffet.html>. Accessed October 13, 2015.

39 The Berkeley Temple organizes a food offering for monks on Sundays. Participants include both temple members and the general public. Offering alms becomes an effective tool for fundraising due to the religious and cultural meanings invested in such an act.

40 John M. Posted 2/15/2009. Yelp. "Review for Buddhansorn Thai Temple," [Online]. Available at: <http://www.yelp.com/biz/buddhanusorn-thai-temple-fremont>. Accessed June 4, 2012.

Temple Food: A Community in the Making

Buddhist community-making is a complex and many-sided process. It takes more than selecting an abbot, electing a board of directors, establishing a temple school, conducting rituals, and teaching meditation to build a temple community. Food, which has long been taken for granted, plays an important role in community building. Food has been consistently integrated into every community activity at Thai American Theravada Buddhist temples: merit making, articulating Thai identity, practicing inclusion, tightening social ties, acquiring material and financial support, providing a platform for temple members to demonstrate their moral worth, enriching diners' palates, as well as communicating Thai religious foodways. The story of temple food is the story of how Thai Americans, together with a diverse assortment of other participants, build and sustain a community both spiritually and materially.

Temple food courts were created out of the need to survive. Before coming to the United States, Thai migrants and monks hardly imagined that they would run a food court open to the public within a temple complex, something unknown in Thailand. By operating a food court, the community challenges the division between spiritual and material. Boundaries are bent, twisted, and redrawn depending on the conditions at a given moment. On the one hand, they do not hesitate to reify Thai culture and Thai identity. On the other hand, they welcome everyone who comes to the temple and adapt to American tastes. Often the food court becomes the most interactive and dynamic venue within the temple complex. It is not only culinary and romanticized space, but space where spiritual practices take place, and the gendered division of labor is reproduced.

Thai temple food courts are still in the process of being formed. Each temple employs various strategies to try and do what is the best for the community. Their flexible strategies can be seen as characteristic of a temple food court and community building. When food courts at Wat Thai of Los Angeles and the Berkeley Temple were threatened with being permanently closed, each negotiated with city authorities, fought back against prejudice, and made changes to take their neighbors' concerns into consideration. In this way, these temples were able to keep the food courts operating and develop the temple communities. However, when the city recommended that Wat Thai of Silicon Valley shut down its food court because of parking and use permit issues, the board of directors finally decided to close it to the public but keep operating a Sunday kitchen just for temple members.⁴¹ The abbot explained that the temple can now sustain itself financially without a food court, and that closing it to the public frees up more time for monks and volunteers to teach or study the dharma and practice meditation. Now the temple conducts a dharma talk in English every Tuesday evening. This attracts a different type of participant and has improved relations with the neighbors. Maintaining good relationships with neighbors is crucial as Wat Thai of Silicon Valley is

⁴¹ Since then, every Sunday morning a few volunteer cooks come to prepare alms food for the monks and enough other food to feed the students, parents, teachers, and other volunteers who come to the temple that day. Around 11:30 a.m., the monks, each carrying an alms bowl, come and receive alms food. The monks then go to the chapel, sit in the lotus posture in a long row, and eat from their alms bowl, in which rice, different dishes, and sweets are all mixed together. Laypeople eat the leftovers and those who did not bring food to offer but partake of the food often put money into a donation box.

in the process of getting a construction permit from the city, which will include public hearings about expanding the temple complex. In other words, the circumstances of each temple differ; the decision to operate a food court or not is shaped by a long-term goal of community building.

Even if a temple does not operate a food court, alms offerings remain crucial for the survival of a Thai temple community. This centuries-old practice has been modified, as the monks, regarded as a field of merit, quietly participate in this “field of action” for the sake of the community. Offering alms is simultaneously a religious and economic practice conducted within a complex web of regulations and relationships. Food is continuously used as a delicious ingredient of daily activities that sustain communities.

Temple food shortens the distance between the United States and Thailand, and enables Theravada Buddhism to put down roots in the United States. Food is structurally integrated into Theravada Buddhist practices. Food is used to articulate Thai identity. Food is anything but trivial. We may expand Thomas Tweed’s list of sites where nightstand Buddhists encounter Buddhism by adding the consumption of temple food (Tweed 1999: 75). Eating temple food can be as meaningful and memorable as reading texts, viewing artifacts, performing meditation and rituals, or practicing mindfulness.

Temple food also contests the discourse on Americanization—how immigrants are assimilated into American society. Many Thai immigrants successfully integrate into American society. Simultaneously, they introduce Thai cuisine to Americans and transplant Theravada Buddhism to their new home. They adapt to a new religious and alimentary environment while keeping their faith, culinary practices, and cultural identity. More Buddhist temples are being founded, and the number of people who confuse Theravada Buddhism with Mahayana Buddhism is decreasing. America is changing, in part due to what immigrants such as Thais have contributed to the United States. As Thai immigrants become Americans, they also reproduce and modify Thai cuisine and Buddhist practices. They make their community felt locally through temple food.

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