



Would your customers see this as authentic or disturbing if it was your kitchen?

# Even better than the real thing

WORDS: KERRY RAMSEY

While authenticity is a strong selling point for ethnic food, how authentic can it be before your diners object? We ask some of the best in the business

**T**he experience of tasting authentic dishes from culture-enriched countries has become a popular pastime for even the most jaded diners in Australia. With a mix of unusual spices, intense flavours and traditional seasonings, this fare may seem exotic and adventurous for many Westerners. But when a menu pushes diners a little too far—with the likes of fermented fish or sheep's stomach—it may intimidate and turn away customers.

Ethnic authenticity became a sensitive topic recently when a Sydney-born chef arrived in Thailand to teach the locals how it should be done. David Thompson, former restaurateur of Sydney's Darley Street Thai and Sailors Thai, is revered as an authority on Thai culinary techniques. He became the first chef to score a Michelin star for Thai cuisine—even though his Nahm restaurant happens to be in London. But it was an interview in *The New York Times* that created an uproar.

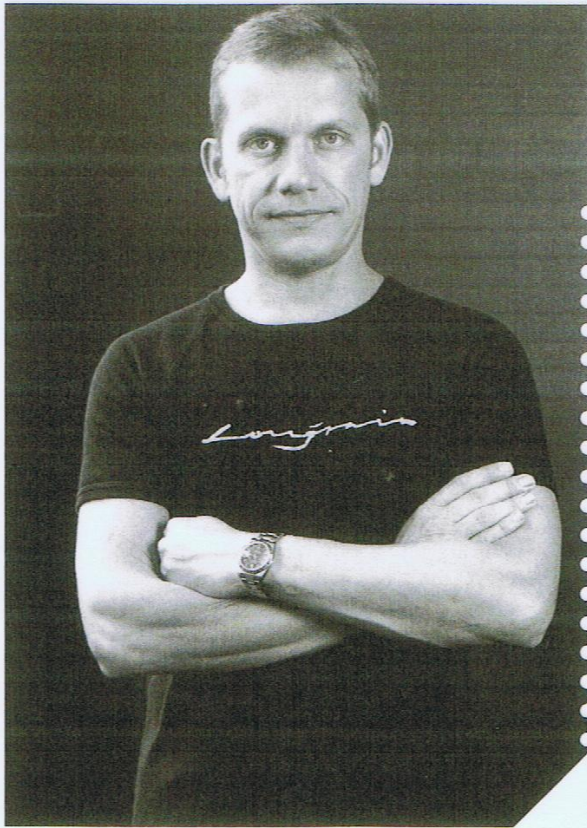
According to the newspaper, he was "on a mission to revive Thai cuisine", since its authentic cooking "is 'decaying' and has less complexity and variation than it once did".

When his alleged comments became an international incident, he had also opened his latest Nahm branch slap-bang in the middle of Bangkok. "The outcry was more over nationalism than anything else," says Thompson. While he claims that the comments were taken out of context, he's still unabashed when he discusses the difference between street food and traditional dishes. Boasting a regional haute-cuisine menu, his new establishment is "extremely authentic and as a consequence, extremely confronting".

According to Bongkoch 'Bee' Satongun, a Thai-born chef who now co-runs Classic Thai Cravings in Mittagong, NSW, she's proud that Thompson has researched her country's food so in-depth. "I could taste his research and study," says Satongun, referring to a recent dinner at Nahm Bangkok.

Dedicated to his craft, Thompson has never pandered to the public's Western palate. "Cooking authentically has to do with what you're cooking in front of you, not what your customers are going to want," says the culinary purist, who can't resist offering "a fermented fish that tastes like the strongest, smelliest cheese you can get" on his menu.

Even Martin Boetz of Longrain in both Sydney and



**Martin Boetz of Longrain isn't sure if diners will stomach some parts of Thai cuisine: "There are some parts I dislike," he admits.**

Melbourne—who trained under Thompson in the '90s—isn't sure if diners are that adventurous. "There are some parts of Thai cuisine that I dislike and that's the heavily fermented stuff," he says. "I'm more into the freshness of lemongrass, lime leaves, Thai basil and beautiful fragrant curries."

Introducing obscure, exotic dishes to the menu may be inspiring for a chef/owner, but it can actually make the customers feel alienated. Hudu Alhassan, restaurateur of African Feeling Restaurant in Sydney's Newtown, has found that he has to "cool down" some of the spicier dishes. "With some of the dishes, we don't add chilli at all, and our customers can pick mild, medium or hot options for many of our dishes," says Alhassan.

There are some regional dishes that don't appear on the menu, including a Ghana soup with dried fish. "When you eat it, you have to use your hands, and for one week you will have the smell of the fish on your skin. I wouldn't dare put that in my restaurant because anyone who's tried it wouldn't come back."

Ahmed Traki, owner of La Kasbah in Brisbane's Woolloongabba, has also found that certain foods don't appeal to the Australian palate. It includes two of his favourite African dishes—red, spicy merguez sausages, and cous cous with obane which is sheep's stomach stuffed with meat, herb and rice. "I have to make it just for myself," says Traki, who offers

French and Tunisian menus at the restaurant. He points out that authenticity involves more than following a traditional recipe—sourcing ingredients is an essential factor. "If my restaurant was in France, it would be much easier to get ingredients," he admits.

Importing ingredients is not only expensive, it may be impossible due to government regulations. Jason Bailey, executive chef and co-owner of Classic Thai Cravings, notes that import laws on fresh ingredients are very tight in Australia and a lot of ingredients are still not grown here.

For Hudu Alhassan, many of his African ingredients have to be dried, such as spices, or processed. "Almost all of our dishes are authentic but you have to keep in mind that some of our specialities are not imported from Africa."

**W**ith Australia being one of the most multicultural nations in the world, diners have undoubtedly become accustomed to unusual dishes over the years. "Australians are a lot more adventurous as they're more widely travelled and therefore more knowledgeable," says Joyce Chiu, director of Obsession Restaurant & Bar, a Cantonese venue in Brisbane's Southbank.

But for a restaurant to produce ethnic dishes, it can be a time-consuming affair. Thai cooking, for example, requires tremendous time and preparation, especially if pastes and sauces don't come from tins and bottles. For Ahmed Traki, some of his Tunisian dishes take up to 48 hours to prepare.

While authenticity can bring instant kudos to an establishment, a little bit of tweaking doesn't go astray. Even David Thompson is happy to reveal that certain dishes have worked in London, but not in Bangkok.

"Everywhere you go, recipes need adjusting for some strange reason," he says. "Dishes that seem to be fail-safe, or in my hands foolproof, don't always translate."

But before a chef should start tweaking the recipes, it's essential to have a good grasp of ancient techniques and cultural references. German-born Martin Boetz felt like he was doing his whole apprenticeship again when he started working under David Thompson at Darley Street Thai in the '90s. "A lot of the techniques were totally new to me," he says.

"I think a lot of chefs struggle for the first few months just to grasp what we're doing at Longrain. It takes three-to-six months to learn."

Teaching is not only for cooks; the customers also need to be educated. French-born Ahmed Traki opened La Kasbah with his Tunisian-born mother as chef. He's found that diners often require help to understand the dishes.

But even if the seasonings and spices are a little bewildering, the diners seem to be satisfied at the end of the day. "After they finish dinner," says Traki, "they come to the kitchen and kiss my mother and say, 'Thank you, Mama'." ○

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Martin Boetz, Longrain