

## **URBAN CULTURAL OMNIVORES, UPSCALING ETHNIC FOOD AND CULINARY REPRODUCTION IN *MARCO* AND *SUNTIANG***

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### **Abstract**

Culinary practices have always been considered as social and cultural activities signifying ideas of continuity and transformation regarding one's culture and identity. As migration happens, people move from their hometown and recreate familiar food and flavors in their new home. Therefore, the study of culinary practices will reveal the dynamics of constant negotiation between having to trace back the familiar taste, for example by using inherited recipes, with the necessity to innovate and reproduce meals from their hometown with new ingredients and materials found in the new place. Furthermore, in an urban setting that has been heavily influenced with a variety of culinary practices from other locales in Indonesia or from other countries, culinary practices in Jakarta could no longer be analyzed as merely everyday activities as they have become an arena of contestation and negotiation. This research discusses how two up-scale restaurants, *Suntiang* (a Padangnese-Japanese fusion restaurant) and *Marco* (a self-proclaimed Padang *peranakan* restaurant), re-inscribe Padangnese cuisines and make new meanings on „old“ traditional delicacies.

**Keywords:** culinary practices, innovation, cultural omnivores

### **Introduction**

Culinary practices in the city, in this case Jakarta, is a representation of the complex disjuncture in (re)constructing ethnic identities. “Cities move, people move, food moves: tracing these movements creates a new focus on urban culinary geographies...” (Bell, 2002, 11). As people move from their hometown to the capital city, they bring their culinary knowledge and preferences. The study of culinary practices in Jakarta will reveal the dynamics of constant negotiation between having to trace back the familiar taste from „home“ for those who migrated to Jakarta and the necessity to innovate and reproduce new flavours to suit the urban context.

Furthermore, eating out has been a lifestylization of city culture, as people need to adapt to the urban demand of practicality and efficiency. In modern times, as argued by Moio, Arnould and Price (2004), particularly in an urban setting, food consumption has been altered to fit the fast-moving life styles. For example, Cwiertka (2005), who discusses about the trajectory of Japanese cuisines popularity in Europe, argues that the popularization of Japanese restaurants is not an isolated phenomenon as it is highly influenced by the changing lifestyle of the Europeans. "Eating out has increasingly established itself as a leisure activity, regardless of social standing, and it has become an ever-important aspect of consumption." (243)

It is significant to analyze these changing lifestyles in relation with culinary practices in the city in the context of how they are produced. Cheung and Tan (2007) argues that "...a truly comprehensive view of food cannot neglect the politics of food production, in particular, how, when, from where and even why different kinds of food are produced, prepared and supplied." Therefore, the main focus of this article is to see how the chosen case studies, two up-scaled restaurants, *Suntiang* (a Padangnese-Japanese fusion restaurant) and *Marco* (a self proclaimed Padang *Peranakan* restaurant), re-inscribe Padangnese culinary practices. By utilizing ethnographic research methods, specifically participant observations, and textual analysis, the article examines how both restaurants construct contemporary meanings on the „old and traditional“ Padangnese delicacies. Research findings reveal that these Nusantara ethnic culinary practices are problematized through innovation of menus and the presentation of food, the ambiguous strategies of exocitizing whilst familiarizing and the quintessence of urban dwellers as cultural omnivores.

### **“Merantau”: Contextualizing Padangnese Culinary Practices in Jakarta**

Within the historical trajectory of migration in Indonesia, the practice of migrating from one place to another or more specifically from one island to another in Indonesia has become a “tradition” among several ethnic groups in Indonesia, for example people from Bugis, Makassar, Bawean, Banjar and Minangkabau. One of the most known examples is the wandering journey of people from Bugis and Makassar. They have sailed to Western and Southern part of the archipelago and then established new settlements in the new places since centuries ago. Likewise, for the Minangkabau people, the migratory journey can be traced to the fifteenth century. Tome Pires (quoted in Andaya, 2008: 95) stated that many Minang settlements were found on both sides of the Malacca Strait. At the Malayan peninsula, the settlement then developed into one kingdom namely *Negeri Sembilan*.

The practice of this migration for Minangkabau people is known as *Merantau*. As stated by Mochtar Naim (1984), migrating is a tradition of leaving their hometown of their own volition for a long time with the aim of making a living, studying or seeking experience and usually with the intention of returning home. Initially those who traveled were men from Minangkabau who had reached adulthood (around 18-30 years old). They came out of the core area in Minangkabau to the coastal area (Kato, 1982: 78). Over time this rotating mobility process gradually becomes a permanent migration (Salazar, 2016: 37). According to Kato (1982: 242), this tendency was referred to as "*Merantau Cino*", which refers to how the nomads were no longer individuals but participated in bringing their wives and children to settle in the overseas region.

In relation to this history of migration from the Minangkabau area, the history of the dissemination of Padangnese restaurants in Indonesia is not clear. Some scholars have argued that it was due to the migration of people from Minangkabau to other parts of Indonesia, such as Java. Even though the development remains an empirical question that needs further investigation, Klopfer (1993) “examines the transformations of Minangkabau cuisine as it moves from village to Minangkabau expatriate communities and to the restaurant-going Indonesian middle class.” (293) These restaurants become the signifier of Minangkabau identity in the urban context even though it does not actually represent the everyday cuisines of Padangnese people. Furthermore, Klopfer also argues that “...Padang restaurants actually represent a specific type of Minangkabau cooking associated with ceremonial feasting and male migration.” (295). It also uses specific style of serving the dishes, which is many small dishes brought to the table and customers can freely choose which dish they want to eat.

Klopfer states that Padangnese restaurants in Jakarta are highly masculinised because they “...are run by men and employ mostly men. Women, usually related to the male owners, can be found as cashiers or washing dishes, but only men are considered appropriate as waiters.”(300) Furthermore, as explained earlier, “*merantau*” has been argued by a number of scholars as a part of Minangkabau culture or simply due to economical condition and this is highly related to the development of Padangnese restaurant in Jakarta as a part of the new settlement of Minangkabau people. For example, meat, one of the main staple dishes in any Padangnese restaurants in Jakarta, according to Klopfer’s research, is not a common item in the everyday diet of people in Minangkabau and mostly only served during ceremonies (rituals). For these ceremonies, men usually do the slaughtering and cooking of meat outdoors, which is different from the everyday cooking process as it is mostly done by women in the kitchen. “Minangkabau men not only do the butchering, but they are also responsible for cooking the curry, known as *gulai*, in a iron cauldron over a wood fire in the house yard ...” (298). Therefore, we can see that due to the tradition of ‘*merantau*’ and the fact that meat dishes such as *gulai* are usually served during ceremonies and they are prepared by men, the cultural practices in Padangnese restaurants in Jakarta are heavily masculinized.

Besides the transformation from feminine to masculine principles embodied in the establishment of the Padangnese restaurants in Jakarta, intriguingly, they are not all owned by a Padangnese, some of them are owned by business owners coming from different ethnic groups, even Chinese Indonesians. This multiplicity of ethnic backgrounds in the culinary practices in Jakarta is a common thing because the inhabitants of the capital city consist of people from different ethnicities. Not only the owners, the consumers also come from different ethnic backgrounds. In other words, those who eat at a Padangnese restaurant could come from other ethnicities, such as Batakese, Javanese, Menadonese, Chinese Indonesians, and many others. To see how ethnic identities interplay in the cultural practices happening in Padangnese restaurants, two case studies have been chosen. The two chosen restaurants are problematic because they play with the notion of ethnic identities, particularly from Padangnese-Japanese and Peranakan Padangnese cuisines.

### **Upscaling Padangnese Cuisines: *Suntiang* and *Marco***

These two restaurants were established in recent years and both represent the upscaling process of Padangnese cuisines, since these restaurants are located in high-end

shopping malls unlike the „regular“ Padangnese restaurants. The first case study to be discussed is *Suntiang*, which was opened in November 2013 in *Pondok Indah Mall 2* and now it has expanded to several other high-end shopping malls, such as Grand Indonesia. *Suntiang*'s tagline is “The First West Sumatran and Japanese Fusion Restaurant.” Caesarlita (2015) explains that the owners, who come from a Padang ethnic background, intentionally wanted to open an up-scaled Padangnese restaurant and chose to hire a professional Japanese chef to come up with several types of fusion food. The chef then learned how to make Padangnese cuisines from the grandmother of the owner, emphasizing the significance of „inherited recipes“ in re-inscribing ethnic culinary practices. The name *Suntiang*, in West Sumatran slang actually means marriage, symbolizing the hibridization of two types of food: Padangnese and Japanese.

By analyzing the menus, particularly „*rendang roll*“ and „*gulai ramen*,“ research findings reveal that what is being fused together creating these new and innovative dishes actually diminish the Japanese flavour. The Padangnese elements overpowered the Japaneseness of the dishes even though in terms of appearance, it is a Japanese cuisine.



(*Gulai Ramen*)



(*Rendang Roll*)

First of all, *rendang roll* (made of *rendang* beef, cucumber and lettuce wrapped in Japanese rice with dried seaweed with more *rendang* and sesame seed as the topping) looks like a regular sushi because it used the same principles of sushi presentation. However, once you taste it, the most dominant flavour is the taste of *rendang*. The same thing with *gulai ramen*, which is basically Japanese ramen noodles cooked in a Padangnese curry soup. Just like a regular ramen, the condiments used are boiled eggs, chicken tempura, mustard greens, carrots, radish and dried seaweed as the topping. However, just like the *rendang roll*, the curry flavour is dominating the dish emphasizing its Padangnese element.

Ng (2001) explains that in 1970s and early 1980s, sushi was considered as an expensive and exotic Japanese food served only in luxurious hotels and high-class restaurants. In its development, it becomes more popular due to its exotic appeal. To accommodate to the local taste and ensuring its ongoing popularity, sushi needs to be „localized“ to fit the local taste but not so much as to undermine its exotic appeal. “When the food of one ethnicity or nation food is introduced in other parts of the world, the cuisine undergoes standardization and modification to adapt to the receiving culture. This process helps construct its global identity.” (Bak 2015, 183) As a global food, sushi is more than a type of food or a commercial product because it also carries cultural meaning. In Jakarta, sushi represents modernity and global/international cuisines. However, there are some

adjustments that need to be made which makes sushi in other parts of the world very different from sushi restaurants in Japan. For example, in Japan, sushi restaurants only sell sushi, while in Jakarta, it also sells other type of Japanese food, such as tempura, ramen, and many others reflecting its lack of specialization. In Jakarta, restaurants rarely use sticky Japanese rice because it is more expensive and often substitute it with long grain Thai rice.

There are two strategies in the process of localization or in the case of *Sunti*, fusing Japanese and Padangnese food, which are exoticizing and familiarizing. These two moments should not be seen as two separate processes because both happen simultaneously. On one side, Padangnese cuisines become „exotic“ (different yet enticing) and vice versa. It is unfamiliar and due to its unfamiliarity, it becomes interesting. However, at the same time, at least for the Indonesian consumers, there are familiar flavours. It might look Japanese, but it tastes like Padangnese food.

On the other hand, *Marco*, a self proclaimed Peranakan Padangnese restaurant reinscribe Padangnese cuisines by relying on the narration of two „local“ ethnicities: Padang and Peranakan (Chinese Indonesians). Marco, the name of the main chef, is represented as a chef who wants to reinvent food from his ethnic background, a Chinese Peranakan from Padang. “The journey of Chef Marco in finding old recipes of Padang Peranakan in nearly every district in West Sumatera generate knowledge of variety dishes recipes from different part of the regions. Through his talent and passion, he successful creates traditional cooking method combined with modern fusion food or even International cuisines.” (<http://www.marcopadang.com/>).

Handayani (2015) explains that Marco Lim, the chef, went back home to West Sumatra to learn with his parents and grandmother before he finally opened his first Padang Peranakan restaurant in 2009. Now, there are at least five Marco restaurants in several high-end shopping malls all over Jakarta, such as Lotte Shopping Avenue and Pacific Place. He explains that the Peranakan Padang cuisines are lighter in flavour. Marco Lim in his interview for Juliansyah article (2016) explains that:

*“Kami menyajikan masakan padang peranakan. Merupakan hasil perpaduan teknik memasak dan bahan-bahan makanan Tionghoa dan Padang. Dari racikan resep asli yang sudah turun temurun, serta aneka macam bumbu dan bahan yang segar asli Minang...”*

“We serve padang peranakan food. It is a combination of Chinese and Padangnese cooking techniques and ingredients. From original recipes inherited for several generations, and a variety of spices and fresh ingredients from Minang ...”

From this quotation, we can see that the core of the dishes sold in Marco is the fusion between Peranakan and Padangnese food, not only from the recipes but also from cooking techniques and ingredients.

From the research team’s observation of the menus, there are not actually a lot of significant differences between the common Padangnese restaurant menus because, for example, the main specialty is „*Randang Itam Kayu Bakar*“ (Beef shank stewed in coconut milk and cirik minyak (condensed burnt coconut oil), mixed with herbs and ground curly red chili. Cooked 8 hours with traditional techniques using wood-burning stoves. Taken from the

website). *Rendang* could be found in any typical Padangnese restaurants. However, there are several dishes that, according to the explanation in the menu, are Padang Peranakan cuisines. For example, „*Baramundi Kuah Kuning*’ (Fish soup cook with mix turmeric spices. Traditional Chinese Padang dish special from West Sumatra. Taken from the website). In the explanation, it is clearly stated that this dish is „Peranakan Padang” food. Upon testing, as explained by Chef Marco, the flavour is quite subtle with a clear turmeric broth, which makes this dish in a way different with the heavily spiced Padangnese cuisines.



(Baramundi Kuah Kuning)

All in all, the narration of „inherited recipes” in *Marco* is quite similar with *Sunti*. Both chefs went into training with family members, particularly female family members, in this case the grandmothers before they finally come up with menus and open the restaurant. If we go back to the discussion of the masculinised principles of Padangnese restaurants in Jakarta, in the up-scaling process, it is still masculinised even though in the earlier process of innovation, the role of the feminine principles, in this case the role of the grandmothers, are really significant. It could be argued that, momentarily, the up-scaled Padangnese culinary practices returned to its domestic and feminine roots before going back to its masculine dominant discourse.

Furthermore, in relation to culinary innovation, scholars, such as Ottenbacher and Harrington (2008), „...have recognized the concurrent factors of the environmental, institutional, organizational and socio-cultural context as a critical prerequisite...” (244) to understand the innovation strategies used by culinary actors, specifically chefs. In this research, the institutional and organization settings of an up-scaled shopping mall restaurant, which is completely different from the „regular” Padangnese restaurants in Jakarta have become the foundation on how innovation work in *Sunti* and *Marco*. Adjusting to the up-scaled shopping mall target market’s taste is significant in their culinary innovation. Dishes need to be served in a particular way, for example in *Marco*, they are served in small portions compared to the generous portions in regular Padangnese restaurants. The presentation of the dish, due to the institutional setting, affects the process of innovation as food must not only taste good but they must also look good. The chefs in this case study have become „... a cultural intermediary, a taste maker ... ” (Bell, 2002, 13) re-inscribing Padangnese cuisines in their ongoing process of innovation and transformation.

### **Conclusion: Becoming Cultural Omnivores**

In conclusion, *Sunti* and *Marco* have re-inscribed the meaning-making process of the „old and traditional“ Padangnese delicacies. Research findings reveal that the culinary practices, either in the notion of Japanese-Padangnese fusion food in *Sunti* or the Peranakan-Padangnese delicacies in *Marco*, reflect constant negotiation and dynamic transformation between two different ethnicities. This is done through culinary innovation and also through the exocitizing and familiarizing strategies. Even though „...restaurants are, in the first place, commercial institutions and must often innovate in order to compete for the customer“ (Cwiertka, 2005, 266), these multiple forms of innovation and other strategies could also be analyzed as a site of ideological battleground in which the dichotomy of old and new, modern and traditional, or global and local are being challenged.

We would also argue that this phenomenon could also be seen as a reflection on how people in the city have become „cultural omnivores.“ In their sociological exploration of British urban middle-class eating out, Warde, Martens and Olsen (1999) identify a tactic of cultural omnivorousness among particular social groups particularly in an urban context. A modern consumer is potentially overloaded with the numerous options, for example the growing number of restaurants offering food from all over Indonesia and all over the world, and this can cause personal anxiety. With so many products to be consumed on the market, consumption in relation to the process of constructing one’s personal identity becomes laden due to the unlimited choice. “Cultural omnivorousness is thus a “coping strategy” based on information maximization: the reassurance that comes from knowing the choices we make are as informed as we can make them” (Bell, 2002, 15). Some scholars argue that omnivorousness starts to become like a compulsion. There seems to be the need to eat everything “...in the hope that the “best bits” can then be assembled into a new you—or, rather, a better, more accurate reflection of the real you.” (Bell, 2002, 15). The cultural omnivores are bound to find “all you can eat” and to eat it all in order to assemble their modern and global identity as it is constructed and problematised by *Sunti* and *Marco*.

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