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Culinary school grooms quality Thai chefs to meet rising demand



Chef Chumpol Jangprai jams a class full of young enthusiasts.

Every day, five new Thai restaurants open for business somewhere around the world, adding to the estimated 20,000 Thai eateries already operating globally, according to the Thai Chefs Association.

"There is a huge demand for Thai chefs," said Chumpol Jangprai, vice president of the association and managing director of MSC Thai Culinary School.

"All students here can be assured that they will get a job," he said. Well-paid jobs are one of the selling points of the school, the brainchild of Chumpol, Minor International and S&P Syndicate.

The sky is the limit for well-trained Thai chefs due to the rapid expansion of Thai hotel chains overseas as well as demand from standalone restaurants that strive to satisfy global palates with authentic dishes.

In the past, Thai chefs earned less than Bt40,000 a month at Thai restaurants overseas. As authentic Thai food is in high demand, those chefs can now earn more than Bt200,000 a month at premium restaurants, Chumpol explained.

As job opportunities are plenty, he was not surprised that his school's two-year professional course comprises many students with university degrees, some in nutrition and food science areas. Though the school, which only opened its doors earlier this year, is open to people aged 18-45, all the students in a class observed last week were below 30.

Upon graduation, the students receive diplomas certified by the Education Ministry. The school aims to attract 28 students for each professional class, with an annual total of 100 students in a year. The students are trained to cook all types of Thai food through 900 hours of class instruction and 188 hours of on-the-job training. Most importantly, they must excel in Tom Yam Kung - the most popular Thai dish among foreigners. The unique identity of Thai food is highlighted, though it can be adapted to local palates.

The equipment used in the classes meet international standards; for example, they work with different types of chopping boards and stoves used in all big kitchens.

To be eligible to enrol in the classes, the students must pass an initial interview process as the school aims to train only those who are determined to embark on a culinary career and satisfy market demand. Upon graduation, they must be ready to fly to countries where Thai chefs are in demand.

Srisuda Kongpaisarnkit, 18, whose parents own a small restaurant in Bangkok, said her goal as a student is to attain the skills to help upgrade the family restaurant.

"I joined the Open House and decided not to pursue a university education," said Srisuda, who had initially intended to get a degree in home economics. Asked if she misses being with her friends at university, she said: "No. My friends have to spend four years to get a degree and get a job. I will spend less time."

According to Chumpol, MSC's first goal is to produce quality Thai chefs to satisfy global demand. It also serves as a centre of excellence for both Minor and S&P, who use the school for training and research and development activities.

In 2008, Minor took over Thai Express, a casual dining chain, from a Singaporean holding company with 80 branches in China, the Maldives, Malaysia and other countries. All chefs are trained at MSC for one month before being posted to Singapore. S&P also operates five restaurants in the United Kingdom.

"MSC can also support our expansion into other segments," said Chaiyapat Paitoon, vice president for strategic planning at Minor.

"Yet, it's not our goal that the graduates work for us. Our goal is to produce quality chefs for any kitchen around the world," he said.

Chumpol was elated when he shared the news that a restaurant in the United States had already booked one of his students.

Aside from professional and short courses for the general public, the school is also looking for new opportunities. It may offer a professional course for Thai restaurant entrepreneurs next year. Next, it hopes to become the certification centre for all Thai chefs who want to find jobs overseas. "Our goal is to be the first choice of authentic Thai restaurants around the world who want a quality chef," Chumpol said.

