

Redbull, Sriracha, and Spicy Thai Peanut Salad Dressing

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When I started my education at Harvard, three things surprised me most: Redbull, Sriracha Hot Sauce, and Spicy Thai Peanut Dressing. Coming from Bangkok, Thailand I feel a unique connection to each of the three objects. I grew up surrounded by Redbull and Sriacha. But before Harvard, I had never seen Spicy Thai Peanut Dressing.

In Thailand, where Redbull originates, the drink is non-carbonated and has a reputation of a “rickshaw drink”, a cheap energy drink for those who make a living from manual labor. One town where Redbull is especially popular is Sriracha, a district in Eastern Thailand that also happens to house its specialty spicy seafood sauce. The third object, Spicy Thai Peanut Dressing, however originates from Satay sauce served with marinated skewers on the Java island in the country of Indonesia. Which, for those unfamiliar with geography, is not a part of Thailand.

That people’s understanding of my culture is different from mine is the biggest culture shock I experienced upon coming to Harvard. I mean, how do I even begin to articulate that Pad Thai is inspired by Chinese and Vietnamese cuisines? That lunch in Annenberg dining hall was the first time I ever encountered vegan Tom Yum soup? That Thailand’s most famous curry dishes: red curry and green curry are not called “curry” in Thai; do not even contain curry? That I have low tolerance for spicy food? That there are so few elephants in Thailand, I have seen them only twice in my life? Both during my visits to the zoo.

How most of you come to know my culture is different from how I have come to know mine. The image that you might see in popular culture or when you take a vacation to Bangkok or Phuket or from the movie Hangover II do not always fully reflect what it is to be Thai or what it is like to live in Thailand.

You might be familiar with the Bangkok night life, the beautiful tropical beaches, and spicy nutty Thai food. But unless you have been fully immersed in Thai culture, you will likely miss the fact that we find Pad Thai unhealthy and do not eat it very often. Or the education system that teach all children both Thai and English since 1st grade. The fact that we use British and American English so interchangeably newspapers use the terms soccer and football to describe the same sport. That Buddhism is so central to our lives we write our dates using the Buddhist Calendar and observe Buddhist holidays. Or that because of our conservative culture, it can feel a little uncomfortable when foreigners greet us with hugs and kisses. Or that to show respect for personal space we greet each other with a Wai, a lotus-shaped hand gesture combined a respectful bow.

Reflecting on my culture shock experience, I don't think it was too bad. For the most part it brings an interesting conversation to the table in a dining hall or at restaurants like Spice Thai Cuisine.

The shock has taught me that there are always two sides to a culture, how natives perceive it from the inside and how others perceive it from the outside. Though differences in perceptions from both sides are common occurrences, when natives and non-natives interact they often do not realize that there is this mismatch.

However, while my experience carries an innocuous, even a happy ending, it can be a totally different story when there is more at stake. It is one thing know a little and assume that a peanut dressing is a Thai creation. It is another different thing to know a little and assume for example that a Muslim is a terrorist.

As we move into a more globalized 21st century, transcultural interactions are inevitable on every scale from an individual level to a government level. There will be times that we will make decisions relating to or affecting those from different cultural backgrounds. But how can we be sure that we are making the right decisions when we cannot even be sure that we have the right understanding? Recognizing the inaccuracies in our cultural assumptions is a start.