

The Development of an Indonesian National Cuisine: A Study of New Movement of Instant Foods and Local Cuisine

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Abstract

Consisting of 17,000 islands Indonesia has more than 400 ethnic groups. The image of “Indonesian cuisine” is diverse, depending on where it is discussed or on what kind of food. The term “Indonesian cuisine” is not familiar to the Indonesian people and is rarely used among them. But what we call “Indonesian cuisine” does exist. What then is meant by “Indonesian cuisine,” in what situations is it discussed or where and how do people eat “Indonesian cuisine”?

This research focuses on two trends in Indonesian cuisine development: (1) the emergence and diffusion of Indonesian cuisine as an instant food, and (2) new trends in the development of Indonesian cuisine at the local level. Indonesia’s economic growth and urbanization have affected women’s awareness and values, bringing significant changes in their life styles. Accordingly, women are starting to look for ways to save household labor, and the demand for easy-to-prepare instant foods is on the increase. In urban areas, new trends are emerging with café-style restaurants that are now replacing “food stands,” which used to serve local dishes solely for migrant workers.

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1. Purpose and background of the research

Every country has its own national cuisine: Japan with its Japanese cuisine, Thailand with its Thai cuisine, and France with its French cuisine. If you ask people to name a few Japanese cuisines, Japanese and non-Japanese alike will come up instantly with such representative foods as *sashimi*, *tempura*, *sushi*, *shabu shabu*, and *sukiyaki*.



Karedok: Sunda (west Java) dish

However, the case is different with “Indonesian cuisine” (*masakan Indonesia*). If you ask any Indonesian to name an “Indonesian cuisine,” they will be somewhat embarrassed and hard pressed to name a single dish. If you ask whether *karedok* (boiled string beans, cabbage leaves, eggplants and bean sprouts with dressing made of *kencur*, *terasi*, palm sugar and tamarind) is an Indonesian, the likely answer would be, “You could call it a cuisine, but actually it is Sundanese dish.” Or if you ask, if *ikan rica-rica* (grilled fish with *rica-rica* sauce, a typical North Sulawesi dish, which is made of chilli, garlic, ginger, tomato and lemongrass) is an Indonesian cuisine, the answer might be, “Well maybe, but actually it is Manado dish.” In short, the replies you hear will almost always refer to the ethnic group or the region from which the food originated.



Ikan rica-rica: Manado (northern Sulawesi) dish

All photographs by Michiko Kubo

Consisting of about 17,000 islands, Indonesia has about 490 ethnic groups. Hence the image of “Indonesian cuisine” is amazingly diverse, depending on what kind of foods became the subject of

discussion. In short, the term “Indonesian cuisine” is not familiar to the Indonesian people and is rarely used among them. But what non-Indonesians call “Indonesian cuisine” does in fact exist.

My master's degree thesis focused on the foods of Indonesia, a multi-ethnic country that gained its independence some 60 years ago and is still considered to be a nation undergoing a formation process. The thesis attempted to clarify what is actually meant by Indonesian cuisine, in what situations it is discussed both in and outside Indonesia, and where and how people actually ate Indonesian cuisine. I analyzed this theme from several perspectives: books on Indonesian cooking written in Indonesian, English and Japanese, as well as fieldwork conducted in Jakarta (in the form of questionnaires targeting the general Indonesian public), and through interviews with writers and chefs specializing in Indonesian cookery. My research also included Indonesian embassy chef in Japan, people working in Indonesian restaurants in Japan, and surveys on the menus. In the following are the findings of my analyses.



"Traditional Indonesian Cuisine" for tourists in Jakarta and Bali

The Indonesian cuisine that foreign tourists and businessmen encounter in Jakarta and Bali is actually prepared in a manner to suit these kinds of customers, and it is no coincidence that the food coordinators of most hotels in Bali are usually foreigners, and that the restaurant menu in Jakarta, for instance, happens to be conceived by a writer in Indonesian cookery with a cosmopolitan

outlook. Thus the Indonesian cuisine that foreign visitors consume is almost always served by persons with an awareness of the world outside.

The menus at Indonesian embassies in any given country are intended to represent the national cuisine, but may sometimes be prepared using whatever ingredients are available in that country, or may even be changed to adjust to local culinary tastes of the country from which the guests come. Indonesian restaurants in Japan also have a variety of menus that may be attuned to the culinary preferences of both cooks and the customers.

Such variations are common, but this does not mean the cuisine has lost its identity. Observations show that there are fundamental styles that are not at all affected by the changes, which would generally be a combination of rice as the staple food and other dishes consisting of meat, fish, and vegetable proteins. *Sambal* is the basic seasoning, and the millstone, the tool needed to prepare it, remains unchanged.

In addition to the above, Indonesia's economic growth and urbanization have affected women's awareness and values, bringing significant changes in their life styles. Accordingly, women are starting to look for ways to save household labor, and the demand for easy-to-prepare instant foods is on the increase. In urban areas, new trends are emerging with café-style restaurants that are now replacing "food stands," which used to serve local dishes solely for migrant workers.

In this paper, I will focus on two trends in Indonesian cuisine development: (1) the emergence and diffusion of Indonesian cuisine as an instant food, and (2) new trends in the development of Indonesian cuisine at the local level.

2. The emergence of "Indonesian cuisine" as instant food



Servants for household cooking and cleaning: She makes the paste everyday

From the end of the 1990's to the 2000's, Asian countries were recovering from an economic crisis. This recovery, which included the Indonesian economy, led to greater employment opportunities that affected the social status of women. Formerly in the outer regions, young women seeking employment had no choice but to move to cities and be employed as domestic servants. But now they have numerous opportunities to work at local factories or business enterprises at higher levels of pay and it has recently become difficult in the urban areas to find servants for household cooking and cleaning. At the same time, the demand for servants is gradually decreasing within the middle and higher classes because they prefer to live in condominiums rather than conventional detached houses for safety precautions. This means that more housewives have to cook on their own. The trend, along with the increasing number of women working in society who consequently have

less time for conventional housework, is leading to a growing demand for instant foods.



Instant seasoning mix
“pre-blended seasonings for specific menu”

Instant foods can be defined as instant seasoning mix (*bumbu instan*). According to Fujiki (Fujiki 1997, 99), instant seasoning mix is defined as “seasonings for specific menus,” which is similar in concept to “Cook Do” seasonings released in Japan in 1981 by Ajinomoto Co. Ltd. The instant seasonings are pre-blended and can be heated with other ingredients to make a full dish. Ajinomoto Co. Ltd. of Japan established PT Ajinomoto Indonesia in 1969 and started production in the following year

(Ajinomoto Indonesia). Prior to this, Union Chemicals, Inc. (currently Ajinomoto Philippines Corporation) was established in 1958, followed in 1960 by Ajinomoto Co. Thailand and in 1961 Ajinomoto Malaysia. Ajinomoto products have become well established in Southeast Asia and throughout Indonesia.

One of the most basic instant products is Masako. This powdered relish seasoning is the leading product of PT Ajinomoto Indonesia, and is also marketed under different product names in other Southeast Asian countries. However, it comes in various flavors, and the amount of spice is adjusted to suit the taste of a particular country. The sales share of instant seasoning in Indonesia occupies over 90% of the conventional food market. The hot-selling products are sold at 1,000 rupiah (approximately 9 yen as of November 2008) for one pack, which consists of three small packages (NNA Asia). Especially in regional areas, Masako is popular among the common people, and most customers buy only a small amount in one round of shopping.

The company also releases other branded products such as Sajiku or Saori. Sajiku is an instant seasoning that comes in sachets. Other products include *nasi goreng* seasoning mix (chicken, prawn, sea food, spicy flavors), *ayam goreng*, *soto ayam*, *opor*, *rendang*, *gulai*, and fried chicken seasoning mix. Saori is a brand for



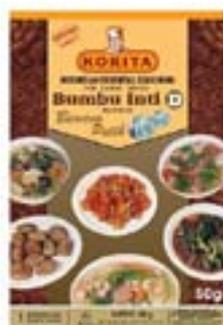
Sajiku and other Instant seasoning mix in super-market

teri-yaki and oyster sauces that used in Chinese, Japanese and other Asian foods and is sold in packages with recipes on them.

Kokita, a company established by Mr. and Mrs. Winata in 1987 in the city of Bandung, is a producer of instant seasonings and foods. The company also produces its own seasonings and basic sauces with proportionately mixed ingredients that follow traditional recipes. According to Kokita's website:



In today's fast moving world, few cooks are able to devote the time and effort required to select and prepare traditional Indonesian recipes. This is why Kokita was established. By using our cook in their kitchens, modern day cooks can enjoy conveniently packaged sauces and essential ingredients offering the same rich and varied flavors of traditionally made sauces.



Products of Kokita

The products of this company are distributed not only in Indonesia but also in the USA, Europe, Middle East, Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Brunei, Australia, and New Zealand. As the company's website commented, "Kokita provides career women and busy housewives with a practical and simple way to capture the unique flavor of traditional recipes." The company distributes a wide variety of instant seasonings:

- "Essential seasoning for chili dishes" consists of red chilies, tomatoes: best for Balinese spicy egg, *ayam panggang*, fried potatoes, fried noodles, etc.
- "Essential seasoning for turmeric dishes" consists of turmeric, candlenut: best for spicy shrimp and bamboo shoot with coconut, *sambal goreng telur*, fish curry.

- “Essential seasoning for candlenut dishes” consists of candlenut, shallots: best for young jackfruit casserole, *opor ayam*.
- “Essential seasoning with garlic and white pepper”: best for stir-fried dishes, soups.

The company also distributes other seasoning mixes in jars and sachets for *soto ayam*, *nasi kuning*, dry curry, *sambal balado*, *ayam goreng*, *mie goreng*, *sambal badjak*, and *sambal terasi*.

Indofood is another leading food company with an extensive distribution network in Indonesia; its business includes the manufacture and distribution of noodles, food seasonings, snack foods, nutrition and special foods, and packaging. In 1994 the Indofood company groups were integrated and listed on the Indonesian Stock Exchange, and today it is a major brand company claiming strong value as well as a large market share. Its flagship products include instant noodles, wheat flour, cooking oil, margarine, and shortening. The company has 15 thousand retailers throughout Indonesia, which is an amazing power base considering the country’s geographical segmentation into many islands. The sales and stock data of each region are managed by IT technologies so as to maximize effective sales, a constant supply of products, and rapid delivery to supermarkets and food shops. The system operates through the company’s 60 supply points, 49 stock points, and 22 branches. Indofood’s corporate policy is stated in its website as follows:

Indonesia, an island of spices, has a variety of herbs and spices growing near the Equator. The country’s multi-ethnic culture offers several thousand different dishes using spices to add exotic flavor and aroma. Indonesian herbs and spices are already well known among the world’s culinary and cuisine. We are committed to continue and expand our investigations and research on Indonesian spices and herbs and to introduce them to the global food service industry. Through our long experiences we have acquired the skills to preserve the aroma and flavor of freshly ground spices and succeeded to produce freeze-dried and air-dried products from the ground spices.

While Indofood continues to develop new products, technologies and network systems to meet consumer needs, it has in addition recently introduced a variety of products for the health conscious consumers at all age levels, from infants to adults. With the objectives of “from spices to high quality foods, from Indonesia to the world,” the company is expanding its distribution channels through five overseas bases to Asia, Europe, Middle East, United States, Australia, and Africa.

Indofood's 2007 annual report (Indofood) shows an increase in the shipment of instant noodles (*mie instan*) amounting to 12 billion packages compared to 11 billion the preceding year, thus accounting for 85% of total shipment of instant noodles in Indonesia. The company has three major brands of instant noodles, namely, Indomie, Sarimie and Supermie. Instant noodles, air-dried noodles, mini-cup noodles are increasing in sales and the company's instant noodles are exported to about 30 countries (including Saudi Arabia, Brunei, Australia, Hong Kong, United States and Europe).

The company sells sauces (soya, chili, tomato), instant seasonings, powdered spices, supplementary foods, and syrups to hotels and food service companies throughout Indonesia. There are three types of food seasonings: sauces, instant seasoning mixes, and recipe mixes. The 2007 total sale of instant seasoning mixes was 46.3 billion rupiah, showing a year-by-year increase of 28%. This increase is also reflected in the amount of exports to Asia and the Middle East, including Japan and African countries.

I also analyzed a number of books on Indonesian cooking published both in and outside Indonesia and prepared a survey targeting the general Indonesian public in terms of their instant food preferences. The study also included interviews of people in Japan working in Indonesian restaurants.

The Emergence of "Indonesian Cuisine" as Instant Food

Menus of Instant Seasoning Mix (4 companies)	Menus of Indonesian Restaurant in Tokyo (16 restaurants)	Menus on Indonesian Cooking Books (Indonesian, English, Japanese) (20 books)	Questionnaires targeting the general public in Jakarta (145* people) (2008.2.12-2.24)
nasi goreng 4	nasi goreng 12	sate 19	gado-gado 84
ayam goreng 4	rendang daging 11	nasi goreng 16	pempe 49
soto ayam 4	sate 11	gado-gado 13	rendang 46
rendang 4	mie goreng 11	soto ayam 12	nasi goreng 45
opor 3	pisang goreng 11	sambal goreng 11	gudeg 39
gulai 3	gado-gado 11	ayam goreng 10	soto ayam 38
sambal 3	emping 9	gulai ayam 10	nasi uduk 28
nasi kuning 3	tempe 9	opor ayam 9	sate Padang 26
laksa 2	ayam goreng 9	pepes 9	sate Madura 26
rawon 2	kankang 9	rendang 9	sayur asem dan ikan asin 25
tumis kangkung 1	tafu goreng sambal 8	ayam pangang 8	gulai kambing 25
gado-gado 1	daging belado 8	mie 7	nasi Padang 23
sop buntut 1	sambal goreng udang 7	karedok 7	coto Makassar 21
ayam pangang 1	gulai 7	lontong 6	sop buntut 20
pepes ikan 1	soto ayam 6	ikan rica-rica 6	nasi kuning 19
sate Padang 1	ikan rica-rica 6	sop buntut 4	opor ayam 19
kare kambing 1	ayam panggang 5	kare ayam 2	sate 18
cumi goreng 1	ikan pepes 5		tahu goreng 17
empal 1	kare ayam, kare udang 5		ayam rica-rica 17
	sop buntut 3		

*They are the answers to the question, "What kind of menu do you recommend to foreigners as typical Indonesian cuisine?"

Comparison of the data in all four categories reveals certain menus in common namely, *gado-gado*, *soto*, *rendang*, and *gulai*. The menus of instant seasonings commercially available (such as *gado-gado*, *soto*, *rendang*, and *gulai*) are derived from the local dishes that had spread across the country via the movement of migrant workers, especially during the Suharto period and the introduction of transmigration policy. As the popularity of these dishes grew throughout the country, people became less aware of the local features, and the public questionnaire shows that these dishes are generally regarded by many as “Indonesian cuisine,” not necessarily reflecting any particular ethnic groups (*suku*). This emerging concept of Indonesian cuisine, which goes beyond the framework of ethnic groups or local dishes, applies to *masakan daerah* (regional cuisine) as well.



Nasi goreng



Sate

These dishes are served in the restaurants throughout Indonesia, especially in the cities. *Nasi goreng* and *sate* are also widely served dishes, yet few people can remember what the original local names were. These dishes, moreover, correspond to the “Indonesian

dishes” served in Indonesian restaurants in Japan, appearing as well in Indonesian cuisine cookbooks published inside and outside Indonesia.

On the other hand, the market is not yet so large for frozen foods and foods sold in retort pouches, as the variations are still limited. My investigations in several supermarkets in downtown Jakarta show that frozen foods only have a few variations of chicken cuts and fried potatoes. The reasons vary from the low popularity of freezers and microwave ovens to electrical shortages and power failures due to floods.

In Europe and the United States in the 1970’s, companies tried to commercialize foods in retort pouches for household use but failed because large-size refrigerator-freezers were already widely used, making storage at room temperatures unnecessary and also because cooking basically involved roasting and heating in ovens. Even now foods in retort pouches are not so popular, while the demand for frozen, canned, bottled, and dried foods is overwhelming. In Japan, however, foods in retort pouches are more popular, because the use of hot water for cooking (such as boiling, steaming) is common in Japan.

These observations suggest an extremely high potential for wider use of foods in retort pouches, given as well, the sufficiently low price of such foods in Indonesia. Also, it is probable that many Indonesian people working abroad would use them.

Measuring spoons and cups, more than intuition and experience, underscore the role that cookbooks play in providing standardized cooking information across the nation. Similarly, instant seasonings allow people to reproduce the same flavor of dishes every time by simply opening the package and mixing in the ingredients. This could mean a homogenized cuisine that may eventually dominate Indonesia's food taste. Homogenization is not a natural but a human-induced phenomenon brought about by the food and food-service industries. These instant foods allow people to cook simply and enjoy the same flavor of dishes whenever and wherever they want. As instant foods become ever more popular and the flavor of foods becomes homogenized, the dishes selected for instant foods may give the Indonesian people the common concept of a national, rather than local, dish.

3. New trends in the local cuisine

Local cuisines are not disappearing. Rather, they are adjusting to taste changes in urban areas. Hence a variety of dishes will remain to be enjoyed as authentic local cuisines, while others will take the form of instant seasoning mixes, which in turn will define (conceptually speaking) the nation-wide taste. The new local cuisine is a completely different movement in which even differing local dishes will be featured to become a totally new brand of service to its customers. This is a unique and very encouraging phenomenon.



Local cuisines have become ever more popular with the implementation of transmigration policy and the human movements of migrant workers to large cities. Prior to this migration policy, local dishes were widely served at food stalls and food courts. But in Jakarta and other urban areas local cuisine is, as mentioned, being served in new cafe-style restaurants with strong local features. For example, local dishes normally served by restaurants in Manado and Sunda are now finding their way into shopping malls, and these branch restaurants are crowded with office workers, both men and women, during lunch breaks. What used to be eating-places for migrant workers have been converted into the most fashionable cafes.



The new trend in local cuisine, food court in shopping mall

Let's have a look at some examples. The menu at Celebes: Rasa Manado (taste of Manado) offers such typical local dishes as *bubur Manado*, *ikan asin*, *ikan rica-rica*, *cumi wok*, *ayam bakar*, *ayam rica-rica*, *ayam wok*, *sayur wok*, and *sop ikan kuah asam*. Yet the menu image is no longer one of local dishes “served for migrant workers” but of brand products served in stylish cafes. For instance, one cafe called Warung Daun (Restaurant of Leaves) has two shops in downtown Jakarta and serves Sundanese dishes, which are known for their variety of raw vegetables. Dishes with raw vegetables comprise the Indonesian cuisine, which consists mostly of stewed or fried foods. Additionally, Warung Daun serves organic vegetables and organic rice grown in Middle Java, thus accentuating its image of healthy Sundanese cooking, and the restaurant emphasizes “food safety and security,” a recent topic of intense public interest. The restaurant even has a corner section where organic rice is sold as well as high-priced organic ingredients imported from overseas countries, such as Japan. At present, the organic food ingredients are purchased only by the urban wealthy, but there is a growing interest not only in the finished food product but even in the food materials, stimulated by the abundance of food related information coming in from overseas.



Celebes: Rasa Manado (taste of Manado)



Chicken satay



Chili paste with mango

Restaurants with local cuisine origins are emerging as avant-garde Indonesian cuisines. The new trend is accompanied by fast food shops that also serve foods based on local dishes and restaurants, suggesting a colonial atmosphere of “*tempo dulu*” (the good old days). Java cuisine, as well, is becoming part of this traditional mix, and overall there seems to be no limit to the ongoing trend, not to mention great expectations for the future.

Organic vegetable and grain “No artificial flavor”



“Warung Daun” organic restaurant



Organic rice used to be imported, now it is domestically produced



“tempo dulu” (the good old days) style restaurant



Javanese fastfood restaurant

4. Conclusion

After discussing the two paths of development in present-day “Indonesian cuisine,” the emergence and spreading popularity of instant foods, and new trends in the local cuisine, there are three factors that seem to define the concept of an Indonesian national cuisine. First is a homogenized Indonesian cuisine resulting from the recent popularity of instant seasonings, second, the continued existence of local cuisine, and third, the appearance of new brands of local cuisines. The analytical results indicate that a common concept of “Indonesian cuisine” beyond the framework of ethnic groups or local dishes (*masakan daerah*) has been gradually emerging, and evolving into a Indonesian national cuisine.

By simply opening the package and mixing the ingredients, instant seasonings allow people to reproduce the same flavor of dishes whenever and wherever they want, suggesting that a homogenized cuisine is spreading throughout Indonesia. As instant foods become ever more popular, the homogenized selections are giving the Indonesian people a common concept that extends beyond the idea of a local dish.

Local cuisine has not disappeared. Instead it is changing and showing new elements of taste based on urban taste expectations. Some of the local dishes

will remain to be enjoyed as “Indonesian cuisine,” and others will take the form of instant seasoning mix becoming widely known, conceptually speaking, as a common fare (*masakan daerah*). There is yet another completely different movement in which the local cuisine features even stronger local dishes. Further studies will be required to observe what these new phenomena will lead to, and whether or not the homogenized flavor of “Indonesian cuisine” (*masakan Indonesia*) may be a factor to bring about “national standardization.”

Glossary:

ayam bakar: grilled chicken

ayam goreng: fried chicken

ayam panggang: charcoal-grilled chicken

bubur Manado: porridge Manado-style

gado-gado: boiled vegetable salad with peanut sauce

gulai: stew with turmeric and coconut milk

ikan asin: salted fish

ikan rica-rica: fried fish with chili-pepper sauce

kuah asam: sour soup with fish

mie goreng: fried noodle

nasi goreng: fried rice

nasi kuning: yellow rice with turmeric

opor: chicken simmered in mild coconut curry Jawa style

rending: beef stew Padan style

sambal bajak: fried chili-pepper sambal relish

sambal balado: red pepper sauce Sumatra style

sambal goreng telur: boiled egg with spicy sauce

sambal terasi: chili-pepper sauce with garlic, shrimp paste and palm sugar

sop ikan: soup with fish

soto ayam: turmeric flavored chicken soup with vermicelli

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