THE THAI WAY OF COOKING KING ABALONE, ALIAS CHICOREUS RAMOSUS, WITH A NOTE ON COOKING IN INDIA

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A decision was made

The TMMP group has now worked with the muricid *Chicoreus ramosus* for nearly a year and the same questions have been addressed many times: how do the snails taste? Is this species really so good to eat as the grapevine has it? Will the snails be suitable for canning and export to foreign markets?, etc.

Finally, one day in April we contacted the Laian Lao restaurant in Phuket, a leading restaurant in Thai-Chinese cooking of sea food, and asked for a lunch prepared by use of *Chicoreus ramosus*, exclusively. The owner recommended 6 popular dishes, which we gratefully accepted, but many more dishes would be possible.

Culinary treat

A TMMP team composed of 7 Thais and 5 Danes gathered around the table at Laian Lao, - some looking forward to the lunch, some more sceptical, but all curious to try this kind of food for the first time. Dish number one was carried to the table. It was *Chicoreus* cooked with oyster sauce and mushrooms. The chopsticks were activated and pieces of *Chicoreus* carefully tasted. There was deep silence around the table for a few seconds. Then every face lit up in big smiles, and as spoken with one voice the TMMP group exclaimed: this is good! The tender muscular foot had been sliced before the dish was served, Chinese style. Again and again the chopsticks selected mouth watering pieces. Then the next dish arrived: *Chicoreus* stir-fried in chili paste and served in red sauce. If possible, this was even more delicious, so it was suggested that we should not refer to cooked *Chicoreus* anymore.

King abalone, alias *Chicoreus*

From that moment the food should be called KING ABALONE because of the superb qualities. The meat could easily compare with large Japanese or North American abalone which cost about 60 US per kg (Nateeawathana & Hylleberg, 1986) against 5 US per kg of our target species. For those interested in marketing and export, there should be a new line of good business. Before our reflections on this matter were over, the third dish of king abalone cooked in a soup, Tom Yam, Thai style, was served. The spirit around the table became euphoric. We were unable to find new words to praise the cooking at Laian Lao, and, of course our precious raw material.

Served the hot way

Next followed king abalone cooked with garlic and pepper. The boiled meat had been fried, which added a new dimension to the taste. The last two dishes were king abalone cooked with red curry and pepper corns, followed by slices of boiled king abalone mixed with chili, ginger and vegetables, a so called Yam. The last dish made the Danes feel like dragons spitting fire. It was a fiery dish, but taken with rice and ample water it was an unforgettable finish of the lunch. Cooking of king abalone Thai and Chinese styles was an unqualified success.

King abalone is competitive

When the meat of king abalone is not requested by the market in larger quantity, it must be because of ignorance, such as the one demonstrated by the TMMP group prior to the remarkable lunch at the Laian Lao.
restaurant. We are sure that the cheap king abalone easily can compete with the costly true abalone which has a reputation of superior quality among the molluscs used for food. However, it is important to know how to prepare the king abalone. It takes time, but this investment is rewarded when the dinner is served. The manager of the Laian Lao restaurant was so kind to let us follow all steps from arrival of the raw material until the food was ready to serve. In the following we report what we learned:

Small scale fishermen deliver

King abalone is delivered to the Laian Lao restaurant by a group of fishermen referred to as sea gypsies because of their ethnic origin and lifestyle. They catch the snails by diving in the waters around Phuket Island. If the snails have worn shells without ornamental value, the sea gypsies will break the shell and remove the meat which is sold directly to the restaurant. However, if beautiful shells are present, the sea gypsies will sell the complete individuals to shell dealers on the island. By doing so they obtain a higher price than they can get from the meat alone. The dealer will then immerse the whole shell in boiling water until the meat is sufficiently lose to be removed. The slightly boiled meat is frozen and stored until a large quantity has been obtained.

Cooking takes time

When the fresh or frozen snails are delivered to the restaurant the cook will first clean the meat, i.e. mucus is scrubbed away, and any rests of digestive glands and mantle removed so only the pure meat of the strong muscles of the foot remains. Each individual is checked for odour and texture of the tissues. The smell of the meat must resemble fresh sea water. If different, or if the meat is watery, the snails are discarded. Next the meat is boiled for one hour. The meat is scrubbed once more to remove pigmentation and remaining mucus. The meat is now boiled for 36 hours in fresh tap water. At intervals the cook will inspect the boiling water. When it turns yellow or greenish because of pigments which dissolve during boiling, he will replace the water with fresh tap water.

Frozen meat keeps well

The king abalone we had for lunch had only boiled 24 hours, and we found this meat to be very tasty and tender, but the chef at Laian Lao claims that it will be even more perfect after 36 hours of boiling. The boiled meat is now ready for slicing and final cooking in the various ways described above. The restaurant purchases meat in quantity, up to 30 kg at a time. After boiling, the meat is packed and deep frozen so the restaurant is always prepared to defreeze the meat and serve dishes according to customers choice. The meat keeps well in frozen condition and it does not lose flavour or change texture.

Cooking the Indian way

During the 2nd workshop held at Annamalai University from 4-14 May, the Indian TMMP group had prepared two dishes made of king abalone. The meat had been cleaned and prepared as in Thailand but it had only boiled 6 hours with the result that the meat only became soft, not tender. It had a slight rubbery texture when chewed. However, it was very tasty and prepared with Indian curry or deep fried after dipping in batter, we enjoyed the meal.

A new research project developed

At the workshop we explained the Thai way of boiling the meat. As a result one of the Indian participants immediately developed a new research project involving Chicoreus ramosus. He wanted to study the chemical changes taking place in the meat as a function of hours of cooking and the temperature applied. He wondered what hap-
pened to the proteins of the meat during cooking. Such knowledge should be important for the food processing and canning industries. Certainly, in private housekeeping we do not believe that the meat will be attractive with a cooking time of 36 hours. The process of making the meat tender must be speeded up. Alternatively, the meat can be purchased ready cooked, either in a deep frozen condition or in brine in a can.

REFERENCES