Marketing of Unique Local Food Culture: Moo Chamuang

The context
Tropical fruits are deeply rooted in Thai food culture. Chanthaburi Province grows some of the best durians, rambutans and mangoes in the country. *Garcinia cowa* Roxb., another member of the *Garcinia* family, known in Thailand as Cha-muang, is often grown as a minor component in mixed crop plantings in most parts of Southeast Asia as it has a long juvenile period and slow growth. Once wild, the tree is now commonly grown in home gardens and orchards by the farmers in Chanthaburi Province. It is one of the *Garcinia* species that regularly produces young leaves all year around. The leaves add a distinct, slightly sour taste to local curry, which makes the curry much tastier, according to villagers.

*G. cowa* and Moo Chamuang
"Moo Chamuang" is a local dish made of a spicy pork curry blended with spices and *G. cowa* leaves. *G. cowa* trees and local food culture are interlinked and unique to the Khong Nara community where Moo Chamuang is a preferred dish for the villagers to consume at home. Moo Chaumang provides year-round eatables of good quality, free from the harmful effects of pesticides and chemicals.

Strengthening social and human capital
The women's self-help group based in Chanthaburi Province in Thailand is processing several products derived from a range of tropical fruits, one of which is *G. cowa*. This group was established in 1983 and was the first cooperative group in Khlong Nara District. The group was established after a major storm damaged the community’s durian and mango trees and caused the fruit to drop while still unripe. The quality of this fruit was considered too low to be marketed as fresh products and therefore some of the female members in the community decided to process the dropped fruits in their homes for various value-added products. Women in the community have come together to use unmarketable fruits to produce enough of the value-added products to be able to market them, and they devote their leisure time to adding to the family income.

The district’s agriculture extension office assisted them in the establishment of the cooperative and provided capacity building on processing. This encouraged the group to process more frequently from their homes and to start including other species. After producing value-added products for thirteen years, the group managed to win a provincial award for the good governance and performance of their organization in 1996, the cooperative started producing several products, among which a local dish, for sale in local markets. Seven years later, the women’s group started producing the canned product of Moo Chamuang for sale in local and external markets. They managed to obtain certification for the product from the Food and Drug Administration to guarantee food safety and to attract and strengthen consumer interest. The young *cowa* leaves needed for the dish are procured by the cooperative from its members, who harvest the fresh, young shoots from their home gardens or from the wild. When trees become too tall for the leaves to be easily harvested, they are either cut halfway or new seedlings are planted.

Contribution to maintenance of *G. cowa* to livelihood
*G. cowa* usually grows wild along the margins of the forests in various parts of Thailand. Using the *G. cowa* leaves in traditional food recipes such as Moo Chamuang had been in practice for a long time. Thus nowadays trees are commonly cultivated in almost every home garden for ease of access. The *G. cowa* trees, through Moo Chamuang and related recipes, help provide families with the daily requirements of essential food ingredients to provide nutritional security. In addition, the medicinal properties of the leaves, gum and bark of the tree are known for their contribution to maintaining the family’s good health, particularly for the elderly and women. In addition, the harvesting and processing of the *G. cowa* leaves provide households with additional income through the sale of fresh leaves to the cooperative and additional wages for the local staff who work in the production facility of the women's group.
**Impact**

The concerted collective actions of the women’s group, plus government aid, have enabled them to build a cooperative-scale processing house and to purchase the equipment required to produce canned Moo Chamuang. These activities have increased the value of *Garcinia cowa*, resulting in on-farm conservation of this species and its diversity and increasing the richness of home gardens and orchards by adding another species to the list of their crops. By starting this activity, women’s group members acquired specific skills in the processing and the production of canned products like Moo Chamuang. They gained insights into the institutional framework of a cooperative, their role as members and shareholders and the successful management of an enterprising cooperative. The activity enhanced their social and human capital and empowered the members to make self-directed decisions regarding their livelihood activities and the use of natural resources available to them. It strengthened their linkages and networks with other value chain actors like banks, traders, retailers, exporters and government departments. Profits made by the cooperative have enabled the women’s group to invest in better facilities, diversity products and purchase improved equipment for canning. The women’s group and its members have been able to earn regular income throughout the year with this activity, which provides them with cash in hand even outside the fruit harvest season. At present besides range of other products, women’s groups like the one in Khong Narai are able to sell around 12000 cans of Moo Chamuang per year, earning them about bhat 420,000 Baht (US$ 14,000).

By being added as a beneficial species to families’ home gardens and orchards, the population of *G. cowa* species will be maintained and secured for the future. The activities have contributed to a more resilient agro-ecological environment through the adoption of environmentally-friendly farm practices like avoiding chemical pesticides or fertilizers and using compost.

Canned Moo Chamuang has the great advantage of longer storage times. Prices and income from canned Moo Chamuang are more stable and distributed over the year compared with the sale of fresh fruits or leaves. This product has enabled community members to secure and spread their income over the year, avoiding sole dependency on sales during the glut season with typically low and volatile prices. In this way, households have been able to diversify their income portfolio, reducing the risk of income loss through dependency on a single income source.

**Driving force for success**

The major driving force for the successful establishment of this activity was the confidence of the women that the Moo Chamuang dish would sell and could provide direct financial gains to the members of the women’s group. Although the women had the knowledge of this particular tasty local recipe, the training that was given to them by government programmes like OTOP (One Tambon One Product) helped them to get organized. The training on food safety regulations and requirements, simple household-level canning technology and advice regarding the establishment of a cooperative helped the women’s group to set up a viable enterprise. Later on, financial support from the government, together with the successful accumulation of financial capital through profits, enabled the cooperative to invest in hardware and an improved production facility. The members stressed that another major success factor was the selection of Mrs. Yupa Niyomvanich, a capable, trustworthy and inspiring manager of the cooperative who came up with several product ideas, such as launching of Moo Chamuang.

**A way forward**

On-farm conservation of local biodiversity is embedded in local cuisine and food culture. The continuance of traditional food systems is one of the strategies for the management of agricultural biodiversity. The conservation and maintenance of *G. cowa* trees in every home garden and orchard can contribute to nutritional and financial security through concerted collective actions. The practice described here is very practical, cost-effective and sustainable. The biggest challenge now is related to quality maintenance and marketing, which can be resolved as the self-help group now has the confidence to undertake them. The cooperative plans to increase their sales by exploring new market channels, such as exporting products to other countries, in the near future.

(Compiled by Sameeang Changpraseerat, Sombat Tongtao, Chatchanok Noppapan, Songnet Sonmarit, Bhusan Shiput, V. Ramanatha Rao, Maninder Kuur and Hugo Lamers)