

A History of Sriracha: A Global Hot Sauce Made in America

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Hot sauce is a facet of food culture in the United States. If you are a fan of adding some spice to your food, you have likely heard of Sriracha. Though you may not have heard of the hot sauce manufacturer Huy Fong Foods, you have likely tried the sauce, perhaps on a variety of different cuisines. The now famous Sriracha was not always a household name, and Huy Fong's success story has not been without setbacks. To understand the syncretic history of Sriracha, we must take a journey across time and national borders. From its origin as a condiment originally conceived in Thailand, the Huy Fong Foods product started as a homemade sauce created by founder David Tran, a Vietnamese man of Chinese descent, who then emigrated to the United States where his business grew into a global success. The story of Huy Fong Foods— and of Sriracha more specifically— reveals much about American food culture, US trade law, and the fragility of immigrant foodways. Sriracha, a global commodity defined by its transnational cultural character, is a perfect example of how food culture travels and changes in an ever-globalizing world.

Thai Food in the US Before Free Trade and Sriracha's Early Days

In early 1980, in Thailand, a woman named Thanom Chakkapak began making a sauce she called Sriraja Panich for her family. By 1984, a Thai company ThaiTheParos LLC purchased the rights to distribute the condiment from Chakkapak and still does so today across Thailand as well as 50 other countries. In a section titled "The Taste of the Original" ThaiTheParos's English language Sriraja Panich website states the following to differentiate their product from Huy Fong Foods' more popular alternative:

"Sriraja Panich boasts the taste of the original which features a homonious [sic] blend of "spiciness, sourness, saltiness and sweetness." The sauce is perfectly thick and offers unique [sic] aroma. More importantly [sic], you can feel the taste of real chili as all of Sriraja Panich's manufacturing processes [sic] are done without the use of artificial colors, preservatives, MSG or flour."

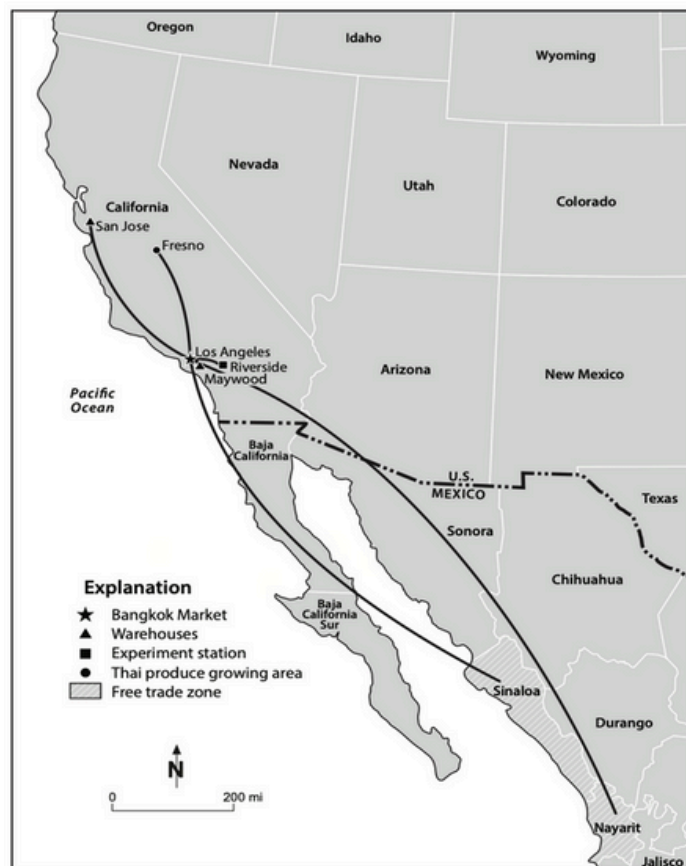
Despite going into commercial production in Thailand, the original Sriraja Panich was not able to be the first of its kind in the United States. Even if the company had been ready to enter the international market immediately, there were significant barriers preventing access to US markets. Not only was importing the final product not an option at the time, but producing it within the United States was also impossible. Even in areas with large Thai diaspora populations, Thai American cuisine in the era before the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 was defined by substitutions. The difficulty of locating Thai ingredients was so pronounced that Thai Los Angelesans organized 120-mile carpool trips to UC Riverside, to harvest leaves from the only kaffir lime trees in the United States at the time. The kaffir limes themselves are inedible, but the aromatic leaves are called makrut and are an essential ingredient in many Thai dishes.²

By the 1970s, the largest Thai population in the US was in Los Angeles, and in 1971, Bangkok Market, a Thai grocery store, opened its doors, but American trade policy was still very overtly hostile toward imports, especially from Asia. In the wake of the Second World War, a rollback in trade protectionism occurred in the United States but despite an overall loosening of international trade law, Asian food imports especially still faced insurmountable legal and cultural barriers. Apart from the law itself which stringently regulated the import of fresh Asian foods, the cultural environment in the US was turning against foreign imports as a whole. To protect their profits from foreign competitors, American businesses pushed a very successful "Buy American" movement which implored consumers to spend money on domestic goods as a matter of patriotic principle.³

Despite Bangkok Market's role in increased access to Thai ingredients in Los Angeles, pre-NAFTA trade restrictions continued to make accessing Thai ingredients very difficult throughout the US. As historian Tanachai Mark Padoongpatt has noted, investigating what immigrants cook and eat is only part of the story but "centering our analysis on food procurement illuminates how US food policies, food systems, global trade, border making and border maintenance defined the look, feel, and livelihood of ethnic communities."⁴ With this in mind, perhaps it is no surprise that large-scale US import of Sriraja Panich was not immediately viable. Bangkok Market's success was the result of careful business strategy, under-the-table smuggling, and the help of US-based professional import brokers.⁵

Despite Bangkok Market's limited success in the Los Angeles area, the United States trade policy both before and after NAFTA requires further examination. Using Pramorte Tilakamonkul, proprietor of Bangkok Market, as an example, we can begin to understand in more detail the nature of US trade law in the pre-NAFTA era. Understanding Bangkok Market's success, and further understanding Huy Fong Foods' choice to use domestic ingredients primarily, can only come with a thorough understanding of the barriers built into US trade policy of the time.

Based on Padoongpatt's account, importing foreign goods began by purchasing the desired goods from a foreign company with an agent or office in the US. Next, importers then hired an import broker to handle the logistical aspects of importing goods.⁶ In the case of food imports, this broker would either have dealt with the FDA or the USDA depending on which food items their employer sought to import.



Tilakamonkul had to manage every part of Bangkok Market's ingredient procurement, from production, wholesale, distribution, and import, to retail. Cartography by Syracuse University Cartographic Laboratory & Map Shop from Padoongpatt "Chasing the Yum" in *Food Across Borders*, 93.

The FDA handled all food imports except for meat and poultry which were within the purview of the USDA, which oversaw the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. At this stage, goods could be rejected if they were found to contain pests or diseases. After the USDA/FDA inspection, the broker would also have to undergo US Customs and US Treasury departments who would

¹ "The Origin of 'Sriracha Panich,'" The Heritage, Sriraja Panich. <https://www.srirajapanich.co.th/heritage.php?lang=en>. Accessed March 23, 2023.

² Tanachai Mark Padoongpatt, "Chasing the Yum: Food Procurement and Thai American Community Formation in an Era Before Free Trade" in *Food Across Borders* ed. Matt Garcia, E. Melanie DuPuis, Don Mitchell. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2017) 83-86.

³ Padoongpatt, "Chasing the Yum," 89.

⁴ Padoongpatt, "Chasing the Yum," 98-99.

⁵ Padoongpatt, "Chasing the Yum," 92.

⁶ Padoongpatt, "Chasing the Yum" 87-88.



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	-SO18- <i>Delicious Ground Red Chili Sauce</i>	12/18.oz.	22.00	16
	-SO1G-	(TOUNG OT KHONG TOI)	4/8.50 lbs.	38.00	39
	-CG08-	FRESH CHILI GARLIC SAUCE	24/08.oz.	26.00	17
	-CG18-	.... <i>Delicious Ground Red Chili w/ Minced Garlic</i>	12/18.oz.	23.00	16
	-CG1G-	(TOUNG OT TOI VIET NAM)	4/8.75 lbs.	45.00	39
	-SR17-	SRIRACHA CHILI SAUCE	12/17.oz.	22.00	16
	-SR28-	.... <i>Chili Garlic, Finely Grounded (Squeezeable Bottle)</i>	12/28.oz.	28.00	25
		(TOUNG OT SRIRACHA)			
	-SB08-	SAMBAL BADJAK (WITH ONION)	24/08.oz.	28.00	17
	-SB18-	.... <i>Cooked Chili w/ Shrimp Paste, Garlic, and Onion in Oil</i>	12/18.oz.	26.00	16
		(TOUNG OT CO DAU)			
	-ST08-	PEPPER SA-TÉ SAUCE	24/08.oz.	32.00	16
	-ST1G-	.... <i>Cooked Chili w/ Garlic & Saté in Soybean Oil</i>	4/8.50 lbs.	54.00	39
		(TIA CHIEU SA-TÉ)			
	-STL6-	PEPPER SA-TÉ OIL (May spill during shipping)	24/06.oz.	32.00	11
		.... <i>Soybean Oil From Pepper Saté Sauce (Chili Oil)</i>			
		(TIA CHIEU SA-TÉ DAU)			
	-SAMP-	SAMPLE/GIFT PACK	5 Bottles	7.00	4
	 One each: SO08, CG08, SR17, SB08, ST08			

Total Cases _____ Subtotal: \$ _____
 Total Weight _____ Shipping*: \$ _____
 Total: \$ _____

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Huy Fong Foods order form is primarily for wholesale, grocery supply, not direct to consumer. "U.P.S. Sales Order Form" Huy Fong Foods Inc. Company Website, May 25, 1998, captured on Wayback Machine.

determine the value of the goods and collect import taxes and duties accordingly. Each government agency involved in the import process used different methods to regulate trade. Customs and the FDA required in-person travel to their inspection offices, and the FDA was still using entirely analog organizational systems. The USDA, on the other hand, had basic computerized systems and allowed goods to be delivered to them.⁷ Thus, any entity attempting to import foreign foods—and any representatives they could hire—could get trapped in bureaucratic limbo for so long that foods would expire before they ever made it to American consumers.

Even as trade liberalization began to remove legal barriers around the beginning of the 1980s, importers of foreign foods, especially produce, had an increasing number of what Padoongpatt terms “non-tariff” barriers to overcome. The USDA, out of concern for native plant species and foreign plant diseases and pests, outright banned certain Asian produce items, such as the aforementioned *mukrut*.⁸

It was during this era in US trade policy that Huy Fong Foods opened their Chinatown factory in Los Angeles. Huy Fong Foods founder David Tran, like Thanom Chakkapak, the Thai Sriracha Panich creator, first began making Sriracha for himself and his family in Vietnam with local ingredients.⁹ In the spirit of the original Sriracha Panich, and of Tran’s own original creation for his family, Huy Fong Foods sourced all ingredients locally in California, thus bypassing the trade barriers importers of foreign foods faced at the time. The now famous Sriracha filled a niche in the American hot sauce market, with its domestic ingredients and low price, that other imported Asian chili sauces could not.

Some of Huy Fong’s early business strategy moves still serve the company and its success today. Sriracha originally made its marketing appeals directly to grocers and wholesalers, spending nothing on advertising.¹⁰ One of the traits that still characterizes Sriracha today is its cult following. David Tran said of Huy Fong’s products, “We make a rich man’s sauce at a poor man’s price.”¹¹ This focus on quality and low cost has paid off. People who buy Sriracha, and other Huy Fong offerings, don’t do so because they’ve been targeted by a marketing campaign, they do so because they have heard of the product by word of mouth, or tried it for themselves. The sauce initially became popular in the Vietnamese community in this way, but quickly also caught on in the Thai, Korean, and Chinese communities, all of whom had large populations in the LA area.¹² This dispersion among various Asian American communities was facilitated in part by Asian grocery stores, which had been sought out by Huy Fong Foods to stock the product. Asian grocery stores, which cater to Asian American communities, often across national identities, are a site of the creation of the syncretic flavor of Asian American cuisines.

Tran said that his original goal was to make a sauce to accompany phở. Huy Fong Foods has always been very conscious of the fact that its customers come from a wide range of ethnicities and backgrounds, and has actively promoted Sriracha as a product for all.¹³ In the early internet age, Sriracha made very direct appeals to its multicultural customer base online. The Huy Fong Foods website published recipes from a variety of cuisines that could all make use of Sriracha. In May of 1998, the recipes offered on the website ranged from chili and Buffalo hot wings to Mapo tofu (a spicy Chinese tofu dish) and Cha-gio (a Vietnamese spring roll preparation).¹⁴ Aside from an offering of recipes, the Huy Fong Foods website also featured an active comments section where customers could leave thoughts and review the products. As early as September 1999, the comments section of the website exclusively features commenters with typical American sounding names from places geographically outside of the Los Angeles area. For example, Jeff Craft from Bremerton, Washington, wrote on August 18, 1999, “I’ve been using Huy Fong Sriracha and Chili Garlic sauce ever since I first found them in a local Asian food store.” Another satisfied customer, Trevor Basset from Colorado Springs, Colorado, wrote on August 8, 1999, “I love this sauce, and really believe it is the hottest out there. Congratulations and Thank You.... Satisfied Customer Across the Country.” Regardless of the authenticity of the reviews, and regardless of how curated the review section may be, Huy Fong’s website in both the recipe section and the comments page illustrates the company’s goal of marketing beyond the Asian diaspora communities in which it first got its start.

In a matter of years after opening in Chinatown, Huy Fong Foods found itself in a position to move to a larger location. By 1987 Huy Fong Foods had relocated to Rosemead, California. Upgrading its production facility from the 2,500 square feet LA Chinatown storefront to the 68,000 square feet Rosemead warehouse marked a huge step forward for Huy Fong Foods. Shortly after this move, in 1990, the company expanded even further, purchasing the next-door Wham-O toy factory space.¹⁵ In this same year, the company also secured the trademark for the now synonymous rooster logo found on all its products.¹⁶

By the year 1990, Huy Fong Foods had the full line of products that customers know today, presented in the very same packaging, with the very same logo design that is also still used. David Tran has said that the design of the Sriracha bottle was influenced by the iconic American Heinz Ketchup bottle design.¹⁷ This prescient vision of Sriracha in the image of Heinz speaks to the trajectory of success that Huy Fong would soon experience and also to the innately American character of the now globally distributed hot sauce. Yet the trajectory toward success is rarely linear.

Though the image of Sriracha being as ubiquitous as ketchup was on the horizon for Huy Fong Foods, the company would first

⁷ Padoongpatt, “Chasing the Yum” 88-89.

⁸ Padoongpatt “Chasing the Yum” 89-90.

⁹ 10, 12, 15-16 “Huy Fong Foods, Inc.” ed Drew D. Johnson, *International Directory of Company Histories* vol 214 (Gale, Cengage Group, 2019).

¹¹ Giacomo Tognini, “How Vietnamese Refugee David Tran Became America’s First Hot Sauce Billionaire” *Forbes*, February 5, 2023. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/giacomotognini/2023/02/05/how-vietnamese-refugee-david-tran-became-americas-first-hot-sauce-billionaire/?sh=770aa9c73f0a>, Accessed December 11, 2023.

¹³ Ernesto Hernandez-Lopez, “Lessons from the Legal Troubles of a Popular Hot Sauce” *Gastronomica* Vol 15, No 4 (Winter 2015), 27-33. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2636294>

¹⁴ “Recipes” Huy Fong Foods Company Website. Captured May 25, 1998 by Wayback Machine. http://www.huyfong.com/no_frames/recipes.html

¹⁷ John T. Edge, “A Chili Sauce to Crow About,” *New York Times*, May 19, 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/20/dining/20united.html>, Accessed December 11, 2023.

experience a number of setbacks. Thanks to the broad, enthusiastic fanbase Huy Fong actively cultivated, the next era in the company's history, though characterized by legal difficulties, recalls, and logistical challenges, did not mark Sriracha's permanent downfall. With locally sourced American ingredients, Huy Fong Foods found that their company's position in the flow of global trade contrasted the difficulties faced by Bangkok Market. The export of American goods abroad faced far fewer barriers than the import of international goods, especially of East Asian origin into the United States. As Huy Fong Foods began entering international markets, they found that setbacks typically involved temporary batch issues with their product, not insurmountable issues with its country of origin.

Hot Sauce Billionaire

The turn of the century presented Huy Fong with a temporary challenge that affected both their domestic and international distribution: in September 1999, the company voluntarily recalled 42,300 cases of Sriracha after the Hawaii Department of Health issued a warning of bottles exploding when opened due to a build-up of pressure.¹⁸ The issue was determined to be related to the continued fermentation of a specific batch of garlic used in the sauces recalled. This specific issue has been a recurring problem for the company, and as recently as 2018, the company has continued to recall bottles that became too highly pressurized.¹⁹

Despite this financial setback, by 2001 Huy Fong Foods was annually selling around six million pounds of its chili sauces, for a total annual revenue of about \$12 million.²⁰ Despite its incredible financial success, Huy Fong Foods remained a family business at its core. Several family members were employed by the company. For example, David Tran's son, William, who was acting as the company's director of operations during the 1999 recall, would in 2009 be appointed as the company's president.²¹ This period in Huy Fong's history marks the rapid growth of the company's now well-known cult following. Though the company was exporting internationally at this point, its California origins were quintessential to its brand. In the manner of California's cuisine melting pot, Sriracha became a staple in commercial kitchens in everything from street tacos to poke bowls.

A combination of business strategy, product quality, and customer enthusiasm contributed to Sriracha's rapid rise during this period. Sriracha's ravenous fanbase is characterized by niche fanaticism, with some satisfied customers going as far as getting the brand's rooster logo tattooed.²² LA Times columnist Frank Shyong went as far as to say that Sriracha had achieved "rock-star status among condiments."²³ Huy Fong Foods maintained its continued commitment not to dedicate any money to advertising, yet it continued to grow. LA hosted the 1st annual Sriracha Food Festival in 2013, where David Tran made a rock-star style appearance as the company's founder.²⁴ The LA Sriracha food festival is a great example of Huy Fong's style of marketing in action. Though the company may not spend money on direct-to-consumer ads, they were a presenting sponsor of the breakout food festival.²⁵ By cementing themselves as a community member of the greater Los Angeles area, Huy Fong Foods made a powerful marketing choice that further cultivated their enthusiastic fanbase in LA and in the greater United States.

This strategy also tells a compelling story about the centrality of immigrant communities to California food culture. Like Tilakamonkul's Bangkok Market, Huy Fong Foods and Sriracha have become an integral part of the flavor of Los Angeles. In the case of Sriracha, the success reaches even further. The first annual Sriracha festival featured prominent LA chefs and their takes on Sriracha as a versatile and exciting new ingredient. One chef, Randy Clemens, who also served as co-organizer of the event, even published "The Sriracha Cookbook." In the spirit of Sriracha's rock-star status, the festival fliers resemble music festival fliers,

listing the line up of chefs presenting their creations, as well as an artist's stylized rendition of the immediately recognizable Sriracha bottle drizzling the red sauce across the page.²⁶ The event also sought to give back to the local community, donating a portion of its profits to Food Forward, a charity that rescues and donates produce that would otherwise be wasted.²⁷ The Los Angeles community, as a major urban center, served as an ideal platform for Huy Fong Foods to market their product, while not ever needing to run actual ads.

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Sriracha's image in this period was nearly untouchable. The story of an immigrant who came from humble origins who became "America's first hot sauce billionaire" was compelling to the fanbase.²⁸ On top of this popular mythos was the fact that the product was high quality, very affordable, and versatile enough to compliment a wide variety of dishes.

The indirect advertising done by Huy Fong and more notably by fans of their products only bolstered Sriracha's rise to stardom. Bon Appétit named Sriracha ingredient of the year in December 2009, and photos of Sriracha on the International Space Station pushed the boundaries of how far from its LA origins Sriracha had gone.²⁹ In 2010, national restaurant chain PF Chang's made a deal with Huy Fong Foods, placing Sriracha bottles on every table, like diner ketchup.³⁰ The image of the Heinz ketchup bottle that once inspired the Sriracha design truly was accurate to how ubiquitous Sriracha would become.

Over the first decade of the new millennium, Sriracha thus went from Asian grocers to kitchens of gourmet restaurants and beyond.

18, 20-22, 30 "Huy Fong Foods, Inc." 2019.

19 Christopher Yee, "Ireland Issues Recall for 'Exploding' Sriracha from California's Huy Fong Foods," *The Mercury News*, December 9, 2019. <https://www.mercurynews.com/2019/12/09/ireland-issues-recall-for-exploding-sriracha-from-irwindales-huy-fong-foods/>. Accessed December 11, 2023.

23 Frank Shyong, "Sriracha maker adds heat to clash with Irwindale," *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 2013. <https://www.latimes.com/local/la-sp-m-2013-nov-09-la-me-1110-sriracha-20131110-story.html>. Accessed December 11, 2023.

24 Jenn Harris, "First Annual LA Sriracha Festival Coming to Downtown," *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 2013. <https://www.latimes.com/food/dailydish/la-dd-first-sriracha-festival-20131002-story.html>. Accessed December 11, 2023.

25 Harris, "First Annual LA Sriracha Festival."

26 "LA Sriracha Festival" NightOut Tickets Page. <https://nightout.com/events/lasrirachafestival/tickets>.

27 Accessed December 11, 2023.

28 Tognini, "How Vietnamese Refugee David Tran."

29 Victoria Von Biel "Best Foods of the Year from Bon Appétit" *Bon Appétit* December 16, 2009. <https://www.bonappetit.com/uncategorized/article/best-foods-of-the-year-from-bon-appetit>. Accessed December 11, 2023.

Sriracha was born in a period when trade restrictions made importing quality Asian ingredients difficult. As a result its commitment to locally sourced ingredients, and its family run business style, made it an approachable member of LA's cuisine scene. LA Chef Randy Clemens says it best in the introduction to "The Sriracha Cookbook." Clemens says, "Over the past few years, however, [Sriracha's] fame has carried it beyond the Asian sector, landing it on countless diner counters, restaurant menus, and into the hands of some very upscale chefs. References in several notable cookbooks, as well as appearances in several episodes of Top Chef and on the shelves of Wal-Mart, all stand as testaments to its welcomed ubiquity and tasty reputation."³¹ Clemens was right; by the mid 2010s, Sriracha had become a household name, and Huy Fong Foods had become an unparalleled success - like Heinz Ketchup.

The Move to Irwindale and Huy Fong Foods' Legal Problems

In light of Huy Fong's massive success of the early 2000s, a larger production facility would be required to keep up with demand. In 2010, David Tran began designing a more automated factory, which the City of Irwindale, California, a Los Angeles suburb, won the contract for. The new facility would cost \$40 million, and would encompass 655,000 square feet, a massive increase in scale from the Rosemead production facility.³² Attitudes in Irwindale toward the move were initially that of excitement toward the development prospects and jobs the company would bring, but quickly public opinion soured.

The legal issues between Huy Fong Foods and the City of Irwindale provide an interesting look at a uniquely American, and distinctly Californian, dilemma. Huy Fong Foods' move to Irwindale was planned at length in collaboration with the city, and the company took on great financial risk to move to such an expensive, state of the art production facility. After the new facility opened its doors, the City of Irwindale almost immediately threatened to shut down the new factory due to complaints from local about symptoms caused by the fumes generated in chili pepper processing. The city sought an immediate temporary restraining order on Huy Fong Foods production, citing the factory as having created a public nuisance with chili pepper odors.³³ Huy Fong quickly sought to remedy the issue and get back to production by installing a \$600,000 filtration system, but the reports of the issue persisted and the City continued to pursue legal action against Huy Fong Foods.³⁴

Irwindale's response quickly caught the attention of both local California and national press. The response of the LA suburb had distinctly familiar undertones of prejudice and small town, suburban politics. The Los Angeles Times reported in October 2013 that "Tran said he began to get an 'odd' feeling about the city's behavior."³⁵ And it wasn't only Tran who felt odd. Irwindale's description of the odors as "aggressive" and "spicy" even after the installation of the air filtration system hit familiar notes. The Pasadena Star News reported that out of 61 complaints lodged with the City of Irwindale, a city with a population of 1,500, only four could actually be traced to issues caused by Huy Fong Foods.³⁶ In a review of the City of Irwindale's legal challenge against Huy Fong Foods, Professor of Law at Chapman University, Ernesto Hernandez-Lopez, stated, "[b]ecause of Irwindale's small size, city leaders tend to cater to residential complaints, even when to the outside world these concerns appear overblown or absurd."³⁷ Trust between the City of Irwindale and Huy Fong Foods broke down over the public nuisance complaint. Despite the fact that an Irwindale judge blocked the temporary restraining order, which according to Tran, would have put Huy Fong Foods out of business permanently, the fractures in the company's relationship with the City of Irwindale would remain.³⁸

Even after the complaint was dropped, Irwindale's response to Huy Fong Foods' alleged odor issue so directly after courting the company to move in sparked broader political debates when Huy Fong Foods publicly announced that they were once again considering relocation. Cities across the country offered Huy Fong

Foods pitches intended to entice Huy Fong Foods to set up shop in their cities.³⁹

The "discovery" of Huy Fong Foods' odor issues came just as the company was experiencing a period of dramatic growth and popular success. In 2016, the City of Irwindale continued to draw out conflict with Huy Fong Foods and sued the Sriracha manufacturer for unpaid relocation fees.⁴⁰ The original 2010 agreement that Huy Fong Foods came to with the City of Irwindale was that the company would pay a flat fee of \$250,000 to the City for 10 years in lieu of taxes.⁴¹ The 2016 suit alleged that Huy Fong Foods owed the City \$427,086.76 in unpaid fees.⁴² Huy Fong Foods had in fact stopped payments to the City in 2013 during the public nuisance complaint. Although Huy Fong Foods does not dispute that they stopped payments, they filed a countersuit against the City of Irwindale citing a "campaign of harassment" waged by the city council against them.⁴³ Both parties dropped the lawsuits against each other in September 2018.⁴⁴

The heavily publicized legal battles between Huy Fong Foods and the City of Irwindale fanned the flames of interstate rivalry, reinvigorated talk of California's anti-business regulatory environment, and for many echoed familiar tensions toward the smells of immigrant foods.⁴⁵ "Traces of immigrant excess must always be kept at bay and where food is concerned, ... [i]t must not appear 'too foreign,' 'too different,' 'too oily' or 'too aberrant' wrote American studies professor Martin Manalansan, in an essay commenting on the Sriracha founder's legal troubles.⁴⁶

A more recent and contrasting example of this tension in legal proceedings involved a British Equality and Human Rights Commission injunction against Furgus Wilson, the owner of hundreds of rentals in the City of Kent, who implemented a policy banning Indian and Pakistani tenants from renting his properties.⁴⁷ In an email leaked to The Sun he is quoted as having written, "No coloured people because of the curry smell at the end of the tenancy."⁴⁸ Manalansan says, "cities are expected to function as odorless zones" and that smell is a sign of immigrant excess.⁴⁹ In a homogenous suburban community like Irwindale, Huy Fong Foods, with its 655,000 square foot factory, and the jobs that come with a production facility of that size, changes the cultural character of the city's economy. When an Asian-American success story moved into town, Irwindale found a way to legally legitimize feelings of xenophobia along the access of odor.

The Srirachapocalypse Averted

The dispute with the City of Irwindale resulted in a three month pause in Sriracha production during the public nuisance complaint. The term "Srirachapocalypse" or "Sriracha Apocalypse" was coined in 2013 when Sriracha briefly disappeared from store shelves during the public nuisance injunction.⁵⁰ Thousands of dedicated fans online stirred panic over the real possibility that they may never be able to purchase Sriracha again, and some fans went as far as to stockpile the hot sauce. Sriracha returned to shelves with only a brief disruption in production as a result of the Irwindale dispute, but the Srirachapocalypse highlighted the continued fragility of Asian American foodways in the US even in the current era as a result of what some considered racially motivated bans and legal discrimination.⁵¹

The racial makeup of the City of Irwindale is largely Latino with a very small minority Asian population. Huy Fong Foods, a multi-national, multi-million dollar Asian-American company presented Irwindale residents with a case of what Manalansan terms "immigrant excess."⁵² Manalansan writes "smell in America... is a code for class, racial and ethnic differences."⁵³ California, as a leader of national agricultural production, is a state with many smells, some of which are strong and unpleasant by nature. In northern California, in farming communities in the Central Valley, pig and cow farms can be smelled from the freeway. These smells are not categorized as a public nuisance, but rather as natural results of the towns' local industry. As Manalansan and Manuur point out,

³¹ Randy Clemens, *The Sriracha Cookbook: 50 'Rooster Sauce' Recipes That Push A Punch* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2011) 17.

³² Hernandez-Lopez, "Lessons from the Legal Troubles..."

³³ Huy Fong Foods, Inc. 2019.

³⁴ Skovog, "Sriracha maker adds heat."

³⁵ Martin Manalansan, in Anita Manaur and Martin Manalansan, "Dude, What's That Smell? The Sriracha Shutdown and Immigrant Excess," *Interdisciplinary Studies*, January 16, 2014. <https://www.drombosquare.org/drome/what-is-that-smell-the-sriracha-shutdown-and-immigrant-excess/>. Accessed December 11, 2023.

³⁶ "Landon's 'curry smell' letting ban unlawful," BBC, November 8, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-41115522>. Accessed January 24, 2024.

³⁷ Jack Royston, "NO MORE COLOURED OR CURRIES Fury as Britain's biggest buy-to-let landlord bans 'coloured' people in racist rant because they make his properties 'smell of curry'," *The Sun*, March 28, 2017. <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1924519/vivax-let-landlord-bans-coloured-people-in-racist-rant-because-they-make-his-properties-smell-of-curry/>. Accessed January 24, 2024.

³⁸ Jason Koehler, "The Jalapeno Grinding Experiment That Nearly Caused the Sriracha Apocalypse," *Vice News*, July 14, 2014. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/2014/07/14/the-jalapeno-grinding-experiment-that-nearly-caused-the-sriracha-apocalypse>. Accessed December 11, 2023.

“when Asianness comes to roost in the town of Irwindale... the cultural odor of the town also changes.”⁵⁴



Huy Fong Foods factory in Irwindale California raised a “No Tear Gas Made Here” banner above their Irwindale production facility in lieu of the City’s public nuisance complaint. Image: San Gabriel Valley Tribune, December 29, 2013.

Irwindale has a complicated history of racial politics beginning in 1957 when the city was incorporated alongside many other post-World War II California cities as a means of geographically isolating non-white populations from white voting blocks.⁵⁵ Prior to its annexation as the City of Irwindale in 1957, the area was a primarily Latino community. Irwindale was annexed in a push to keep the latino community socio-economically and politically isolated from neighboring white communities. Professor Ernesto Hernandez-Lopez argues that the effort to exclude Huy Fong Foods, as a result of the company’s overt Asian-ness, stems from the long history of the town’s “racial territoriality.”⁵⁶ A town founded to facilitate the exclusion of the LA metro area’s latino population recreated these mechanisms of racialized exclusion when Asian American enterprise came to town. Hernandez-Lopez argues that in a largely homogenous Latino community, excluding outsiders functions as a way to protect privilege and political power in a way that is similar to the redlining and discrimination found in suburban white communities.⁵⁷

Manalansan and Manuur add that Huy Fong Foods being categorized as a public health threat “is part of a longer tradition that views Asianness as a public health menace.”⁵⁸ They continue by adding, “The SARS epidemic of 2002, with its concomitant xenophobic links to the fear of Asian bodies, is not far removed from the panic about Asianness discursively inherent in the charges being levied against Huy Fong Foods.”⁵⁹ More recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, America once again saw the same variety of anti-Asian sentiment through the lens of public health with President Donald Trump tweeting “I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the ‘borders’ from China - against the wishes of almost all. Many lives were saved. The Fake News news narrative is disgraceful & false!”⁶⁰ Further into the past, California specifically has a history of this same anti-Asian sentiment wrapped in the language of public health threat dating back to the year 1900, when a bubonic plague outbreak in San Francisco’s Chinatown neighborhood saw city officials divide plague risk along racial lines.⁶¹ Looking back to Padoongpatt’s account of us trade law in the 1970s and 1980s, we can see this sentiment take yet another shape, “drawing stark lines between non threatening ‘native’ foods and invasive ‘alien’ ones... defining the US nation state as modern, safe, and pest- and disease-free, while constantly under threat from a ‘torrent’ of contaminated imported foods.”⁶²

Whatever the current focus, the US has an undeniable history of xenophobic, anti-Asian sentiments being cloaked in the language

of public health and safety concerns, and the dispute between the City of Irwindale and Huy Fong Foods does not take place outside of this history, but rather within the context of it. Regardless of what future setbacks Huy Fong Foods may face, the company enjoys a broad base of very enthusiastic and very loyal customers. Huy Fong Foods has reached a level of success that will likely allow it to continue making hot sauce for many years to come. In February 2023, Forbes valued the company at one billion dollars.⁶³ Despite the 2013 Srirachapocalypse, and further 2023 supply chain disruptions temporarily removing the product from store shelves around the country, the sauce continues to be a global commodity with a unique history and an irreplaceable staple of American food culture. In 2016, thirty six years after its initial release, Huy Fong Foods’ Sriracha returned to its country of inspiration, becoming available at grocery stores in Thailand.⁶⁴

Conclusion: Globalizing Food Culture

What lessons can we learn from this abridged history of America’s new favorite hot sauce? Sriracha is one of many examples of the effects of globalization in American food culture. American food culture is often thought of as a unidirectional force that flows outward. The McDonalds in Beijing and Riyadh are testament to the dispersive power of American food culture, but today American food is also uniquely defined by interplay between immigrant food culture and the American food business landscape. Orange chicken and cheesy gordita crunches are just as American as burgers and fries.

Sriracha is a condiment that comes from the Thai flavor profile, originally created by a Thai woman for her family, then recreated by a Vietnamese man of Chinese descent, who then immigrated to the US to take the country by storm with his product. Huy Fong Foods has intentionally courted a diverse multicultural audience, and in doing so, created a cultural staple in American cuisine. The international success of the condiment appeals to palates without regard for national origin, but a closer look at the local food politics that Huy Fong Foods has had to navigate, reveals the fact that despite the enthusiastic support of its diverse global fanbase, and the unparalleled financial success of the company, it has never been impervious to the long history of xenophobia and racism in America. The company has faced minor setbacks with batch recall issues, and major setbacks with the City of Irwindale. Despite the convoluted legal battles and the brief pauses in production, Huy Fong Foods more than recouped losses.

Huy Fong Foods is not on par with McDonalds, and its success does not mitigate the inequalities in the flow of culture in the globalizing world. It provides us instead with a look at a case that defies the ubiquity of this trend. Sriracha has become an integral part of American fusion cuisine, and enjoys widespread, international success. Casual customers and devoted fans with rooster logo tattoos can all agree, Sriracha is delicious. In the case of this hot sauce, taste beats the trend. Only time will tell what Huy Fong Foods’ next challenges will be, but whatever they are, Sriracha hot sauce is here to stay, if only because fans cannot stomach the idea of losing access to it.

Huy Fong Foods’ hot sauce, Sriracha, came into being in a period of difficult to navigate US import law, and fragile immigrant foodways. David Tran found a way to create Thai flavors using only local ingredients, both providing a variety of California Asian communities with a shared favorite hot sauce and bypassing the need to navigate the labyrinthine bureaucracy of US trade law. From Chinatown to Rosemead and onward to Irwindale, Huy Fong Foods’ facilities have grown in proportion to their dramatic rise in popularity, with David Tran at the center as “America’s first hot sauce billionaire.” Sriracha is a proud immigrant success story, but more than that it is a story about food culture in the globalized world. Tracking the development of Sriracha across nations, through the US, and then back across the global market with the widespread success of Huy Fong Foods illustrates the

⁵⁴ 58. 59 Manalansan and Manuur, “Dude What’s That Smell?”

⁵⁵ Ernesto Hernandez-Lopez, “Sriracha Shutdown: Hot Sauce Lessons on Local Privilege and Race,” *Seton Hall Law Review* 46, no. 1 (2015).

⁵⁶ Hernandez-Lopez, “Sriracha Shutdown,” 197.

⁵⁷ Hernandez-Lopez, “Sriracha Shutdown,” 200.

⁵⁸ Donald J. Trump “I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the ‘borders’ from China - against the wishes of almost all. Many lives were saved. The Fake News news narrative is disgraceful & false!” Twitter, March 18, 2020. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1240243188708839424>. Accessed December 11, 2023.

⁵⁹ Donald J. Trump “I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the ‘borders’ from China - against the wishes of almost all. Many lives were saved. The Fake News news narrative is disgraceful & false!” Twitter, March 18, 2020. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1240243188708839424>. Accessed December 11, 2023.

⁶¹ Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown*. (University of California Press, Berkeley: 2003), 120-121.

⁶² Padoongpatt, “Chasing the Yum” 90-91.

⁶³ Tognini, “How Vietnamese Refugee David Tran.”

⁶⁴ Victoria Ho, “Thailand Rejoice, Sriracha Sauce Is Now Available - You Knew Sriracha Sauce Wasn’t From Thailand, Right?,” Mashable, December 15, 2016. <https://mashable.com/article/sriracha-now-in-thailand>. Accessed December 11, 2023.

multidirectionality of taste in global food culture.

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