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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Gelato and Gelato Entrepreneurship in Bangkok, Thailand – Food, Fashion or just Happiness?**

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**| ABSTRACT**

This is a study at many levels of very current and seemingly expansive gelato entrepreneurship in Bangkok. Thailand is a country of many waves of food importation over the years. Countries of origin perhaps most obviously include Portugal and China, but also Italy. This study particularly focuses on the motivations and attitudes of current gelato entrepreneurs, especially in the early years of their businesses at and shortly after start-up. All started the businesses they run. However, the study had a further aim, to place gelato culturally in contemporary Bangkok society. Is its currency part of what cultural anthropologists label a culture “vibe”, culturally highly on-trend and what associations might that bring with other product categories? Out of such a mixture of aims came the simple research questions of 1. What are the attitudes and motivations of entrepreneurs within the contemporary gelato Industry of Bangkok, Thailand. 2. What sense do entrepreneurs within the contemporary gelato industry of Bangkok have of the place of their businesses in broader contemporary lifestyles and culture of the city and of the history of food in Thailand. These were to be researched in greater Bangkok, through qualitative inquiry, mainly based on formal semi-structured interviews of gelato business owners but also including observation and lengthy informal discussion with owners. The research revealed that the entrepreneurs were very much aligned with descriptors of artisanal entrepreneurship, such as lack of concern to maximise income or profit and a positive concern to educate customers. Relative to seeing their product and themselves as placed within contemporary society there was only a vague sense of being culturally and commercially on-trend and that as part of their choosing gelato entrepreneurship. However, when specific connections were mentioned, the strongest responses appeared lukewarm, and referring to the generality of social media as a necessary presence for start-up and young businesses at this time.

**| KEYWORDS**

Gelato, food, Italian, Bangkok, Thailand, snack, ice-cream, lifestyle, contemporary, entrepreneurship

**| ARTICLE INFORMATION**

**ACCEPTED:** 19 March 2025

**PUBLISHED:** 17 April 2025

**DOI:** 10.32996/jhsss.2025.7.4.8

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### **1. Introduction**

There are numerous arrival stories for many different foodstuffs into Thailand from overseas. Perhaps the most obvious to consider arose out of Chinese migration into Thailand or Siam as it was until 1939.

The Chinese contribution toward Thailand’s gastronomy included both cooking techniques and new kitchen products. The latter included noodles to act as a staple alongside rice. New cooking techniques included stir-frying, deep-frying and steaming (Stuart-Fox, 2003). Particularly the first two were enablers of the rise of street-based cooking and eating. Chinese coolies’ rented rooms had neither cooking facilities nor leisure space.

Chinese presence in Siam goes back to the thirteenth century. Early on it was associated with the multi-ethnic trading city of Ayutthaya, also an early capital of Siam. There was a surge in Chinese migration to Siam in the closing years of the Nineteenth Century and early Twentieth Century.

Probably the next most important place to consider is Portugal (Bush, 2006). There had been a strong Portuguese minority in Siam, well-documented from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Portugal introduced several plants to Thailand that became major elements in Thai cooking. One, the chilli, became totally integral to Thai cooking, ubiquitous in use. Others are pineapple, papaya, and sweet potato.

The Portuguese introduced technique, process, not just ingredients into Thai cooking. This was particularly true in making desserts, for instance foy thong (golden threads) (Yunibandhu, 2018) and thong yip (pinched gold) (Bush, 2006). Both are names for their colour and the way they are made, to include egg yolks and sugar, specifically dribbling egg yolks into bubbling sugar syrup.

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Another dessert recipe used in Thailand is also very simple to make, again with egg yolks and syrup, but folding in flour to make a sponge cake. This is Khanom Farang Kudi Chin an interesting cake as it also contains a Chinese element in baking with pumpkin (Wancharoen, 2018). The cake, in effect, represents a number of the migrant communities of Kudi Chin in Thonburi.

Italian influence in Thailand, food included, fell into two very different time periods. They mainly occurred through equally different causes and cultural pressures from different demographics, one perhaps more to do with popular culture in USA than directly concerning Italy.

King Chulalongkorn, Rama V, who toured Europe in 1897 and 1905, was not enamoured of Italian cuisine, but his general interest in European Arts, Science, Culture, Lifestyle and Politics firmly embraced Italy. In fact “Europe played a key role and served as a reference point in the King’s policies of modernisation and reform in Siam” (Klauspeter-Schmallenbach, 2004). Italian architecture and the engineering behind it is, perhaps, the most obvious contribution to the newly developing Bangkok. This arose directly out of King Chulalongkorn’s patronage. A Ministry of Public Works was established in 1889 and staffed largely by Europeans, especially Italians. Such Italianate public works as Hua Lamphong Railway Station in Bangkok were an outcome.

There was a similar influx of Italians to the Ministry of Fine Arts. Arguably the most prominent Italian contributing to Bangkok’s development through public art was Corrado Feroci. Feroci arrived in 1923 at the request of King Rama VI. In the public domain Feroci is, perhaps, most associated with Victory Monument and Democracy Monument in Bangkok, but he was also involved in training young Thais. He became the first director of the Silpakorn School of Fine Arts, later Silpakorn University.

Concerning cuisine and arguably etiquette the traditional Thai elite interests looked mainly to France and UK, perhaps France more concerning cuisine of the very highest level, UK often savoury puddings (Wongyannava, 2009). King Chulalongkorn himself wrote a cookbook out of his European travels, *A Cookbook of Western Food* (Chulalongkorn, 2002). Italy was represented by macaroni.

Nibhatsukit (2002) argues that King Chulalongkorn had a specific interest in enlivening the interest of Thai elites in Western food culture. That interest did grow subsequent to publication of Chulalongkorn’s book (Nibhatsukit, 2002). In fact it could be argued that King Chulalongkorn had a wider aim of introducing Western culture in general, particularly European culture, to the Thai elites.

The wave of specifically Italian foods to travel to Thailand that became more embedded took a very different, definitely not regal path, in fact often served as fast food, and in novelty confections such as the Cheese Volcano Pizza. This is not a Thailand of the elites. The appeal is somewhat mass market, what a GI would have picked-up while on rest and recreation in Thailand out of the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s and also the stuff of British “fast food” from that period on. If not quite mass market in pricing most certainly the new Thai lower middle classes attend these restaurants and enjoy the products offered.

The chain pizza sellers in Thailand are big business. The Pizza Company is the largest and has 420 outlets in Thailand, accounting for a 70% market share nationwide (Shoowong, 2024). Each outlet records 2500 to 3000 delivery transactions a month. The Pizza Company accounts 25% of customers as “young generation” (Shoowong, 2024). These young people have many years of buying Pizza Company products left to them and the business is looking to increase the 25% figure speedily.

Companies can tailor their products to the local market in Thailand. Customers seem to have little or no concern for authenticity even in upscale hotel surroundings, never mind as take-out. Adaptation is totally normalised in Thailand (Wongyannava, 2009). It could be that a pizza recipe travelled from Italy to USA, where it was adapted, thence it travelled USA to Thailand where it was adapted once more.

Gelato is the most recent Italy-related product to arrive in Thailand, albeit to a long history of Thai ice and frozen desserts, including ice cream. There have been many gelato shop openings in Bangkok over the last year or two. To the untrained eye ice-cream and gelato look the same. The ingredients are also largely the same, the main ones being milk, cream and sugar. However, the ratios in which these ingredients are adopted differ between the two products. For instance, gelato will have less sugar. In terms of ingredients though fat content is a key, gelato using less cream than ice-cream. The lower amount of fat in gelato is a major element in mouth-feel and taste. The mouth feel of gelato can even be chewy.

This article is focused on neither food technology nor nutrition but a few words are necessary to understand how Gelato is a particularly good fit with the changing demands of the consumer now from elevated personal health and wellness concerns. The latter are most talked about, but gelato is also an expression of changing habits and attitudes in food that embrace more casual dining, perhaps just walking along (Winterhalter, 2018) and an element of do-it-yourself experience in mixing and matching exactly as you want, almost playing as is now done mixing elements of apparel fashion and playing at accessorising too.

Wonderful ambience and a tasty treat in hand or on table will certainly improve well-being and the case is particularly proven for in-shop music. Kantano et al. (2016) experimented specifically with perceptions of gelato which were positively affected by pleasant music and negatively affected by unpleasant music. This concerned the valence of the music and duplicated previous findings outlining cross-modality of perception between food and music.

Generally the case for gelato as healthy has been made through considering nutritional details and those particularly against ice-cream, though sensory responses must always be remembered not simply in terms of externalities but also in the nature of the product itself producing sensory responses. Thompson et al. (2009) usefully combine commentary for both sensory characteristics and production process. Overall, gelato may be characterised as more dense, richer, silkier and more flavoursome than ice-cream.

For example air is normally used to increase volume in frozen desserts. For ice-cream this, called overrun, can be in the range 95-100% (Thompson et al., 2009). Consumers are largely eating air and for instance the ice cream resulting is quite fluffy. Think of the slow churning movement of a gelato machine's paddle as against the speed of food mixing. For gelato the overrun rate is zero to fractional. The rpm of the gelato machine can also have an effect on colour (Planeta et al., 2020), so another sensory issue.

In the case of ice-cream the end product is frozen hard, but not so gelato which is held semi frozen at -11C., while ice-cream is held at about -18C (Thompson et al., 2009). These are process and storage differences between gelato and ice cream. An example of content difference is 4-8% butterfat content for gelato and a minimum of 10% for ice-cream, which Shingh et al. (2020) regard as the major difference between ice-cream and gelato. Worth noting is that the United States Patent for gelato contains neither stabilisers nor emulsifiers (De Stephano et al., 1999). Gelato is unlikely to contain egg (eg Gallary & Wawzyn, 2024).

To summarise, this Introduction may have surprised in presenting a country that has been far more open to outside influence than has been presumed and even solicited outside involvement in a number of areas of national life and development. Wongyannava (2009) straightforwardly suggests that 'Thais, especially the elite, do not have a "monotheistic cuisine"'. Arguably Thais are open to diversity across a number of cultural and social areas more than is often hinted at. Put in other words it has been said that "If one can pay respect to Brahminism, animism, Buddhism, monarchism and Christianity, then one can also eat a variety of foreign foods" (Wongyannava, 2009).

Generalising, Morris has argued that "Contrary to essentialist views of cultural character as set in stone, peoples' cultural conditioning and convictions change over time" (Morris, 2024). Morris (2024) even goes so far as to talk of culture being manageable and also malleable. Interplay between cultures is all important. Nowadays cultural mixing can be achieved anywhere with a mobile phone, a signal and internet access. However, in the past, where better for interaction of cultures than Thailand's ancient port and trading city of Ayutthaya?

## **2. Literature Review**

The aim of this study was to consider and analyse the aims and motivations of entrepreneurs in the gelato industry in the case study city of Bangkok but also the place of gelato in the contemporary culture of that case study city, with a particular focus on the food culture.

This Literature Review thereby has two threads and draws upon two source areas of academy. Firstly, cultural anthropology was drawn on to consider the nature of culture and cultural change covering food. Secondly, recourse was made to established material, mostly from the USA, around entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation. The word fashion applies not only in the clothing and accessories sector but is used in many other sectors. Fashion simply refers to a popular trend and could viably be used anywhere that marketers, cultural commentators or others decide to use it.

There may be fashion in food or drink, a main direction of this article. Equally, though, there are fashions, for example, in music, art, design, architecture, film, literature, word use and the structure of language. "Everything that is part of people's lives is subject to fashion", concludes Winterhalter (2018). Entrepreneurship is often the enabling agent of fashion within capitalist systems, whilst also itself having fashions, for instance recently funding business start-up through Crowd Funding or Initial Coin Offerings. It is offered though that there are occasionally "People's Uprisings", Punk often exemplified as one such, if dated example.

The literature review was undertaken with the aim of shaping discovery of motivations and attitudes of food entrepreneurs not just in general but specifically of gelato entrepreneurs. Gelato is arguably currently fashionable in itself and thereby is an element in the broadly fashionable for some in that adherents, followers and just customers tend to buy into clusters of components in establishing their cultural niche and presenting as part of it.

Polhemus ("Ted Polhemus In The 21st Century") argues the main tendency in appearance styling "relies on surfing, sampling and mixing diverse, eclectic, often contradictory elements into a unique personal statement" ("Ted Polhemus In The 21st Century"). You appear as authentically you simply by "doing your own thing", clustering apparel and accessory components as you think fit.

Appearance is a major component of identity. That might be wearing Underwear or Pyjamas as Outerwear. Equally, pulling elements from wherever may align into standardised groups, even ultimately arriving at cliché as, for instance, the punks mentioned and time-lined approximately 50 years back. Maybe an update should be considered to the massive attraction of manga-referenced clothing and accessories to some demographics at the moment in Thailand.

Winterhalter (2018) suggests that new ways of eating food are comparable with the apparel fashion approaches of "streetstyle", "style surfing", the "supermarket of style" and "sampling and mixing". Some suggested elements of this are street foods, food trucks, gastronomic markets, gastronomic conferences, and surprising and innovative styles of food preparation and presentation.

Kaur and Khera (2024) see food and apparel fashion as areas for self-expression. Both are methods of signalling our identity, who we are. They also suggest similarity between food and fashion in that both are driven by trends, seasonality and occasion" (Kaur & Khera, 2024). In fact food and fashion often work together synergistically in event productions that are deeply complementary experiences for attendees, offering innovative, immersive ways to meet both fashion and food industries. Currently sustainability has begun to be looked at through the optics of both industries together and presented together to attendees, for instance at Forward Food and Fashion in New York in September 2024 ("Forward Food & Fashion for a Sustainable Future"). Food and Fashion, presented by The Museum at FIT September 13 to November 26 2023 considered "We Eat What We Are" featuring a collection celebrating the food (such as okra and Black-eyed beans) and workwear, each reinforcing the message of the other, of Jamaica, Queens in New York. "Activism and Protest" showed ways in which fashion takes cues from protest to examine social justice and activism. "Growing Alternative" showed how slow food is encouraging slow fashion and the embrace of sustainability.

The tableaux at The Museum at FIT were very beautiful, but appeared Static. That is not of the nature of fashion in food, fashion in apparel and accessories or many other fashion-impacted areas. Fashion can be very fast-moving. Monahan (2021) has coined the term "vibe shift" to describe that "In the culture, sometimes things change, and a once-dominant social wavelength starts to feel dated" (Davis, 2022). That begs a point, as in where lies that feeling of datedness? Additionally where do changes in vibe have their inception? As Hayes puts it "Most of us will never party in a Williamsburg Warehouse" (an area of Brooklyn, New York) (Hayes, 2022). The vibes are of the urban cultural elites of New York and Los Angeles not of Tampa (Hayes, 2022). Secondary cities and less are where the stock gets remaindered to before its inevitable death. A corollary is that it could be that vast tracts of USA had been wearing normcore (Fong et al, 2013) before it became a vibe, never noticed when it became a vibe and never noticed when it ceased to be a vibe.

Davis (2022) described normcore as everyone wearing New Balance sneakers and dad jeans. Truthfully, the politics of urban dominance is beyond the scope of this article as is the history of the dominance of particular cities in particular areas of culture and commerce. Ultimately vibes concern the politics of national landscapes and even of the politics and economics of the international landscape. This may resonate and particularly when countries globally are so resolute in their pursuit of soft-power (Nye, 2008) including through cultural presence.

However, it is not just countries or regions that seek and grow soft power, but brands do exactly the same, solidifying or growing their soft power over their territory or seeking new territories. Food and fashion have become bedfellows in brand management. That might mean as little as on-trend canapes being served at basic events, office and inter-office parties included. However, recently the whole issue of collaboration has moved on apace. Inter-related marketing position grew significantly in 2024 with two major collaborations. Kate Spade New York and Heinz launched a capsule collection (Lamour, 2024; Botelho, 2024) of Heinz X Kate Spade bags, pouches, t-shirts, footwear, keychains, wristlets, phone cases, etc. Maybe these were out of the "tomato girl" trend and are young, bright and playful.

During September 2024's London Fashion Week, equal excitement was shown for the collaboration of Hellmann's (mayonnaise) and Chopova Lowena. They launched their mayonnaise-carrying Margaret Bag. The collaborators spoke openly of the benefits. For Hellmann's João Ricardo Brum said "The ambition of the partnership with Chopova Lowena is to keep connecting our brand with younger people, tapping into unexpected passion areas and positioning Hellmann's as a modern, playful, and culturally relevant brand that speaks to the zeitgeist." (Nelson, 2024). The Chopova Lowena partners spoke of not wanting to make a novelty product but "a cool bag that you would want to wear, which happens to have a ridiculous function" (Nelson, 2024)

Turning to entrepreneurship, a main element has been seen as creativity from the 1950s USA, for any business type. Creativity was seen as deriving from the individual's personal character traits (eg Guilford, 1950; Torrance, 1974) a particular example being their divergent thinking.

Over time creativity began to be thought of more as a group activity. Amabile and Pillemer (2012) have time-lined from the start of creativity research out about 25 years to a social psychological approach. Indeed vocabulary has changed to talk of co-creation and so has the type of co-creation talked about. The stages may have been the individual departments in an organisation, then the whole organisation working creatively to creative aims and outcomes. Perhaps next was the movement to external collaborators in co-creation, maybe with other businesses in the supply chain. Next was openness to co-creation with all stakeholders in a business, perhaps building very open platforms for this activity as has happened as the enabler of information and data flow previously along the supply chain. Currently discussion seems most focused on co-creation with customers and in fact Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) first used the term co-creation to describe creative relationships between businesses and customers.

La Poste, the French Postal Service, faced with decline in demand through the internet, needed to innovate speedily. Given an aim to quickly rectify "pain points" in service who better to talk with than customers and staff? An initial task was re-designing post offices, both physically and work process. The re-designed post offices were very much achieved through localised communication between staff, managers and customers. Customer waiting times have reduced by 50% and customer satisfaction is thereby rising (Ramaswamy & Goullart, 2010).

Another good example of multi-way stakeholder communication is the Crowdcube platform. A company makes a pitch for funds. Potential shareholders can ask the company questions, other potential shareholders can join the discussion, the company may reply, potential shareholders may reply, Crowdcube may make the occasional entry to discussion if a legal matter has arisen, etc. Finally the shares have been issued and now all those interactive possibilities apply to matters arising, now often starting with a company announcement. This can result in a co-creation of company policy and action in real time and from all stakeholder sides. The writer has seen company management policy

over-ridden and an entirely new, innovative, approach developed in this way. Meantime the company has an online blog, online distributed newsletter and an events page to communicate with customers.

After creativity comes innovation in a chain that moves to production and eventually to sales. Innovation seeks to move from ideas to having a template for the practical use for those ideas and process for that in the business. That adaptation is known to be difficult. Saarelainen offers that it “is an iterative process, uncertainty and unknown being an inevitable part of it” (Saarelainen, 2019), in plain English a lot of trial and error. Accordingly, the innovator lives in fearfulness (Saarelainen, 2019). Advanced skills of communication, influencing and convincing to secure buy-in are necessary. This is particularly difficult in large organisations, if only because of generalised resistance to change.

That may be one of few generalisations possible. Certainly there is no general academic agreement on what innovation constitutes, how it is defined (Planing, 2017). Baregheh et al. (2009) have tentatively attempted a generalising definition of innovation but what is clear anyway is that innovation is and has to be part of the entrepreneur’s job description and toolbox however ill defined. Without that all that is left is ideas and no route to implementation.

Lastly, hopefully, the entrepreneur gets to the founding of the business, setting it up from getting a tax number and opening a bank account to painting the walls or arranging that, not to mention finding the premises. This final part of entrepreneurship is very much paperwork and physical grind, though some creativity in marketing the new business. At last the entrepreneur is getting ready to greet customers, arranging to have customers to greet and making sales to them.

A lot of challenges to the entrepreneur have been presented by the literature, even possible or likely negatives, yet entrepreneurs survive. The glue that holds the entrepreneur and parts of the entrepreneurial process together may well be passion. Karlsson and Mouthaan have hailed passion as “a facilitator of venture performance, entrepreneurial skills, and psychological wellbeing” (Karlsson & Mouthaan, 2020). Of great relevance to the current article is that Li (2024) sees creativity in cuisine and in fashion as cognate and powered by passion in both cases. Perhaps, though, truth is more banale, marketing advantage to both parties through association of fashion, including elevated fashion houses, with hospitality eg a new, youthful, fun demographic interested in Moschino through Jeremy Scott associating the company with McDonalds in his design and catwalk work (Li, 2024).

However, relationships between food and fashion have become much more solid than that, with fashion houses opening their own restaurant and coffee shops. These might be shop within a shop, as Siwilai and Golden Goose/Younesse in Bangkok. It can also be coffee shops opening their own in-house fashion shops and brands, such as Café Kitsuné in Bangkok. Equally, they might be standalone such as Ralph Lauren’s Ralph’s Coffee in Singapore or The Coach Coffee Shop and The Coach Restaurant in Jakarta. Of particular interest in Bangkok is Louis Vuitton’s LV The Place, a standalone collaboration between Louis Vuitton and very known chef of the moment, Gaggan Arnand. At the level of some of the fashion house hospitality involvements this may not just be brand exposure, including to different demographics, presentation and event space, driving customers toward offline premises (eg Ludmir,2024; Sakhuja,,n.d.; Morkos ,2024) but in some cases representing significant income streams, not just marketing.

### 3. Methodology

The research questions for this study were 1. What are the attitudes and motivations of entrepreneurs within the contemporary gelato Industry of Bangkok, Thailand. 2. What sense do the entrepreneurs within the contemporary gelato industry of Bangkok, Thailand have of the place of their businesses in broader contemporary lifestyles and culture of the city and of the history of food in Thailand

The research design embodied three elements informal discussion, formal semi-structured interviews and contextual observation, the second of those three by far the largest element. Table 1 below shows those elements as well as data analysis methodology embracing thematic content analysis and descriptive statistical calculation and presentation.

Table 1

#### *Research Design*

Data Collection	Data Analysis
Informal Discussion	Thematic Content Analysis
Formal Semi-structured interviews	Descriptive Statistics & Thematic Content Analysis
Contextual Observation	Thematic Content Analysis

The research participants were to be gelato business owners, in Greater Bangkok. They were to be chosen essentially at random but with some view to length of time in the gelato business and geographic location of the business within Greater Bangkok, often ascertained by snowballing process from previous participants.

Owners of gelato businesses were seen as those best placed to comment on gelato entrepreneurship, and especially so if they had started their business. Research would be very detail-orientated with these experts in their field, though ultimately most concerned with establishing

broad themes and occasional categories within those themes. In writing-up a limited number of outliers would also be included, and sometimes are of great value.

The aim was to be covering the entrepreneurial questions mostly, but not singularly, through semi-structured formal interview. The questions as to gelato's fit with contemporary city culture also arose out of the formal interviews, but the focus moved substantially toward informal discussion that could go in any direction that the participant wished. Likewise the discussion format allowed free-form supplementary questioning by researcher. In plain English the researcher could move discussion along from a developing sense of the participant's knowledge of contemporary Bangkok (and other) culture. Finally contextual observation was included to see quality and content of the gelato shop owner's interactions with customers and similarly for their staff and, to some extent, the general ambience of the shops.

At every turn the concern was to give voice to the life experience of participants, particularly through open-ended questioning, the research to be strongly phenomenologically centred, and more specifically hermeneutic phenomenology centred. Ramsook argues that a critical question for participant selection is, simply "Do these people have the experience?" (Ramsook, 2018). A primary concern for this study, for instance, was that participants should have started their business.

#### 4. Analysis

Participants were to be Gelato business owners in the Greater Bangkok, Thailand area. Interviewees came from across the area, including Nonthaburi which is technically in Samut Prakan province but is, in fact, suburban Bangkok, actually a significant growth point within it. The gelato entrepreneurs involved were primarily singularly retailers of gelato to the public, but some also undertook wholesale sales. All businesses had been started by the current owner. The oldest businesses were of 8-9 years duration, and the mode circa 2-3 years duration. One business had opened about 10 days before the owner was interviewed and the researcher had been present on the actual opening day.

The participant cohort comprised eleven gelato business owners, their demographics as in Table 2 below:

Table 2

##### *Demographics of full interview participants*

Owner	Gender	Age	Highest Education
A	Female	48	Postgraduate -Master's
B	Female	32	Postgraduate- Master's
C	Male	48	Undergraduate - Bachelor
D	Female	32	Postgraduate – Master's
E	Female	33	Postgraduate – Master's
F	Female	31	Undergraduate - Bachelor
G	Female	51	Postgraduate – Master's
H	Female	46	High School
I	Male	43	Undergraduate - Bachelor
J	Female	37	Postgraduate - Masters
K	Male	34	Undergraduate - Bachelor

Women constituted 72.7% of the participant cohort and men 27.3% of the cohort. The mean age was 39.5 years, the modal age 32 and 48, median age 37, maximum value 51, minimum value 31 and range 20 (31-51). Highest levels of educational attainment within the participant cohort were Master's Degree (54.5 %), Bachelor's Degree (36.4%), High School graduation (9.1%).

#### 4.1 Formal Interview

Now follows reporting from the formal interviews, but grouped into themes, as derived from thematic content analysis. Where ideas or comments are bunched or just individual approaches often a letter or letters will follow in parentheses, indicating participants with that view, with demographic information given for those letters in table1.

For ease of understanding participant contributions have been given under questions relating to the themes. Those questions may or may not be the questions asked at interview or they may represent such questions combined.

**Why did you set up your Gelato business?** Many reasons were given for starting a gelato business but what was particularly clear was parental financial support as often the enabler of starting a business. One interviewee even pointed to her Chinese Thai heritage as a cultural as well as financial enabler (J). A second underlying narrative was travel as the enabler of discovering gelato at all. ●No knowledge but liked gelato from her European travels. Her parents stepped in to support her in starting a gelato shop (E). ●Bubble tea was declining and concern for health and wellbeing rising so an owner thought opening a gelato shop might be timely (F). ●A gelato shop was her husband's dream (H). ● His niece's allergy issues acted as the motivator in him undertaking the gelato business (I). ●Mother married an Italian, so the

owner to be travelled frequently to Italy. She enjoyed gelato and thought why not introduce it to Thailand (G). ● Loved gelato from her travels in Italy and became concerned to supply gelato in Thailand. Mother wanted her to work in the family haberdashery business but eventually agreed to support her starting a gelato business (J). ● A well-located shop became available, which is unusual for secondary locations in Bangkok, and she thought to take the lease, whilst also thinking of relatively easy and cheap expansion through booths and stalls in malls and department stores (B). ● A complete change of career and lifestyle away from corporate sales. The decision was to embrace his love of cooking and eating in favour of gelato, his own business/self-employment and better quality of life (K).

**Did you start the business to become rich/is Gelato the “Big New Thing? (very fashionable)?** This question elicited a wide range of responses. The only thing that was glaringly clear thematically was lack of interest in pursuing maximum income, a commonality between nearly all artisanal producers and business owners (Azavedo & Walsh, 2024; Wahne et al, 2012). ● One owner participant explained that the idea had never been to make money, or even have a business, but only a hobby (G). ● Another owner looked to be able to make a living, not become a millionaire (I). Similar thoughts of enough income but not a millionaire were held by yet another gelato entrepreneur (F). ● Aim to fulfil her husband’s dream. She never expected the gelato shop to make a sizeable or even significant income (H). ● Ran a bakery and wished to add a complementary business (C). ● Wanted to do what she wanted to do (D). ● Wanted to be rich, but that is secondary to her main priority, being happy (A). A well-located shop became available and the now owner thought her opening a business might help the local community (B). ● Another owner felt that her business may not make a lot of money (J).

**Why do you continue your Gelato business?** This question produced a very mixed set of responses. Thematically “Happiness” seemed the only possible labelling response to such a mixed-bag. Accordingly a summary of every contribution is given in this section, albeit that the last summary is considered an outlier even by the standards of such a mix: ● Enjoys it, particularly the morning walk along the canal and buying the fruit (K). ● Reasonable income and could expand (exampled by pop-up in malls, etc.) (F). ● Because already in it, otherwise back to the family business (J). ● Following a dream. Not there yet but giving it her all (D). ● Because the market is good and she has a good, stable customer base (A). ● Enjoys the gelato business. Has customers about whom she is passionate. Passionate about gelato too (E). ● To make a living and see customer reactions to products (I). ● Passion. Likes ice cream and gelato. ● Sees a good future, as Thailand is so hot, for refreshing products (B). ● Money. Money to pay off the expensive Italian machinery she bought even when gelato was just a hobby (G). ● The premises, including extensive roof area are large and gelato earnings cover the rent. The combination allows her to keep thirteen cats (H).

**Which stimulated you most at start-up - recognising opportunity, founding (setting up) your business or developing your business?** This proved quite a problematic question, despite explaining over and over. Ultimately there may have been human memory issues operational. Two gelato owner participants finally concluded, that they did not know the answer, one couching it more that she could not remember the answer. Her business had started up many years back. The largest group of positively answering participants opted for recognising opportunity. These were among the youngest participants, with the most newly opened businesses, who, for instance, talked excitedly of walking the streets of Bangkok looking at premises. They had had fun, and it was recent. Also readily in their minds were further opportunities for trading places, early expansion, if only by way of mall and shop booths and stalls. There was an excitement and youthfulness in their approach not to mention operating from very newly renovated premises Overall, though answers were not only often missing, but were very prone to be outliers. Two examples follow ● Her husband saw opportunity for gelato in Thailand but she, the participant, saw none. (H) ● The motivator for the participant was that if she did not set up the gelato shop and make it work she would have to return to the family business (J) ● Three participants opted for the Founding category and two participants opted for the Developing the business category.

**Which area of your business excites you most now?** ● Six participants stated research and development of recipes as particularly exciting for them now, along with menu development (A, B, C, E, J, K). ● One was very interested in providing gelato education, particularly workshops, including as an income stream (F). ● One talked about his interest in searching out income streams in general (I). ● Interested in facing challenges and overcoming them (H). ● Two participants were interested in maximising customer care (G, D). ● Following on such customer care concerns one of the two is very focused on health and wellbeing, so plant based gelato together with low sugar, low fat and gluten free versions (G).

**Are you a risk-taker?** ● Seven participants stated unequivocally that they are risk takers ( B, C, G,H, I, J,K), one at pains to point out and example that this runs through all aspects of his life, though several simply mentioned starting and running a business at all as indicative of being a risk-taker. ● One participant stated unequivocally “no” to being a risk taker, pointing out that she operates in a stable and high-end area of the market (A) ● Others came up with “yes and no” answers which could be based on feeling or rational risk assessment. A particularly interesting answer came from one participant (D) in that the answer depended on where in her entrepreneurial career was considered. She was a risk-taker, but her answer was now “No”. She had correspondingly become more concerned to mitigate risk where it was unavoidable.

**Are you passionate about what you do?** Ten out of the eleven owner participants agreed they were passionate about their gelato business. ● One participant argued she is not passionate, the business just being something she wants to do and is easily bored (B). ● By contrast one owner participant claimed “Huge”passion (K). ● Another owner (I) said that if you had no passion at all you would sell the business. It is hard work. ● One owner, despite general lack of specific illustration from participants, became very specific in terms of saying her passions are quality and healthy products. She appeared to find talking of passion in general terms difficult (A). The author saw passion through observation, watching owners with their customers. It was a multiple passion for people, for service and for gelato.

**Was innovation important to what you do?** Broadly innovation was considered important, only one participant disagreeing and only then because of the specific circumstances of that participant's business. The broad theme that emerged was specifically around product development. That had two categories, recipe development and broader research and development in trialling and using new to the participants, perhaps to the market, equipment, techniques and knowledge. Some participants mentioned both. ●Participant focused on both recipe development and shop design (B) ●Spoke of recipe development and product presentation (E). ●Spoke of the need to appeal to Gen Y and mobilising new ingredients and technology to that end.(I) ●Talked of innovation as "paramount".He also had a recipe focus but was additionally concerned to watch for new opportunities. (K) ● Talked about innovation in general in the sense of keeping herself self-challenged (J).

**Is your knowledge of Gelato and that of your staff important in customer service?** Participant gelato entrepreneurs overwhelmingly agreed "yes", that is ten of ten participants answering (for one the question was inapplicable). Answers were varied but often led into a category concerning health and wellbeing as so very on-trend and of interest to consumers, but who are often lacking in knowledge for particular products and product areas. For instance an example could be not knowing butterfat content difference between ice cream at a minimum of 10% and gelato at 4-8% (Shingh et al., 2020). ● An owner flagged the importance of staff training around allergies to be able to properly discuss the topic and suitability of products, even offer warnings, in-shop (F). ●One owner clearly saw provision of product information as a basic tool in making sales (I). ●A further owner went further, seeing explanation of high-quality ingredients such as organic milk and New Zealand butter and eco-friendly presentation as important in indicating his as a premium product (K) (Author: with also an explanation of high retail price out of high ingredient costs).

**Do you want to educate customers about Gelato?** All eleven gelato business owner participants agreed that they want to educate customers. ●One owner clearly understood knowledge differences between customer groups, indicating that local Thais particularly needed explanation and talking through the product (H). ●Another participant saw this as basic CRM (customer relations management) offering advice around, for instance' vegetarian meaning and options or milk types (A). ●One participant offers a library and workshops in her shop and takes questions about what is said in the library books (F). ● Another owner pointed out his willingness to get involved in helping customer understanding but explained that many of his customers are restaurant owners and chefs asking for help with specific issues (c). ●One participant offered only very basic information, an initial starting point to begin explaining (I).

**Do your customers want to be educated about Gelato?** All eleven participant gelato business owners answered in the affirmative, though 6 wished to clarify that they meant some not all customers. "Some but not all" (H) became quite a mantra. ●Two owners (F & K) introduced the pedagogy of their educational approach, that is the customers asking questions and the owner providing answers, though one suggested that might change over time (F). ● Averagely the customers want to learn but his customers include a very high percentage of university and high school students (I) (Author note: a substantial specific clientele is younger high school students, met from school by their parents who are asked to facilitate and fund visits to the shop's cats.)

**How do you feel eating gelato makes customers feel – i Connected to Italy ii Cosmopolitan iii Neither.** This question was important to place the gelato experience culturally, including that there might be no cultural experience in eating gelato, just eating a foodstuff. Three owner participants suggested that customers feel connected to Italy and offered anecdotes to that owner, then repeated to the researcher. ●That the gelato was just like in Italy was offered as a comment twice (E & H). ●Another owner relayed a customer comment that the Gelato was actually better than in Italy (F). ●Two owner suggestions were that customers were simply happy eating (A & B) ●Though two owner participants had opted for the "Neither" choice they elaborated around customers having travelled in Italy and being able to offer gelato critiques., having eaten gelato there (H, I). ● Another owner (K) made an interesting division in his clients, arguing that for Westerners "Neither" would apply but for locals "Cosmopolitan" would apply. The researcher can agree that from observation, not that the shop has many Western (farang) customers. For "local", defined as from the wider region there are many clients, together with truly local locals from Chinatown, all these included in the owner's definition of local.. One entrepreneur participant suggested straightforwardly her feeling that her customers felt cosmopolitan (J).

**Do customers take many Instagram pictures about your shop?** ● Eight gelato business owners said that their customers take pictures, three not so. ● Cats are an attraction at one shop and the levels of photography are very high (I). ●Levels of photography are even higher at another shop (D particularly frequented by social media users. Among them is a specific group of Tiktokers who regularly meet at the shop to film either for pure fun or sometimes making short films (D). ● Another gelato shop owner observed that there is a lot of picture-taking in her shop and that this appeared particularly popular with Thai and other Asian people (E). In general, the researcher observed the same.

**Are you concerned to design the shop with areas for customers to take pictures?** Seven gelato business owners answered in the negative to this question, four answering that their shops were designed with picture-taking backdrops included. ●One owner had particularly included his gelato machine within the shop where pictures could be taken pretending to use the machine or as the gelato came flowing out (K). ● Another owner had had picture-taking areas professionally designed into the fit out, but they could not be too impactful because of the size of the premises, much of which was consumed by a reading and workshop area for gelato-making courses. Some owners said that their premises were unfortunately simply too small to design-in picture-taking areas (F).

**Which is best a big or a small business?** There were six unequivocal answers in favour of small business, essentially outlining high degrees of control, lack of bureaucracy, lack of politics and speedy decision-making. Several owner participants particularly extolled



maintaining quality control in the small business. Five answers were more balanced in outlining positives and negatives around small or large. Big might be good in terms of income, but problematic in terms of scalability and bureaucracy (leading to slow decision-making). ● Small gives close control of quality and customer relations management. Big gives access to finance and bulk-buying discounts (E). ● To be rich big is good. For quality keep small because of greater control (J). ● Big is good, but small is what happens (H). ● Small is good as fast change is possible (G). ● Small is good – no bureaucracy, no politics, free decision-making (K). ● Small grows bigger, but is easier to manage and control (F). ● Small is better for control, for instance over quality (D). ● There are pros and cons. Small businesses are more easily adaptive or you can just do what you want. Large businesses are bureaucratic (B). ● Small businesses give control, for example over quality. There are scalability issues in going bigger but income is better (I). ● Big businesses have so many issues, especially around HR (Human Resources). Flexible tasking is easier in a small business. Small business offers happiness (A).

#### **4.2 Informal Discussion**

It was normalised to spend lengthy periods of time with the gelato entrepreneurs, averagely 1.5 to 2 hrs, but sometimes longer. In three cases there was also a lengthy pre-meet, or e-mail correspondence essentially getting to know each other and arranging to meet. One entrepreneur even took the researcher to another owner's premises to see her operation as a must because she specialises in Thai influenced flavours, this after the formal interview. Snowball referral was also usual.

Informal discussion in that way gave the researcher specific information, but perhaps more important was gaining a general understanding of the industry's issues. The latter acted particularly as a guide to supplementary questioning during formal interviews.

#### **4.3 Contextual Observation**

The majority of gelato business owners were seen in interaction with customers. Contextual observation as a method might be seen as something of an outlier in itself but is actually important in that all naturalistic observation reveals what people actually do rather than say they do and by extension what they think and feel rather than say that they think and feel. Specifically in the current study the researcher's observation enabled checking for such claims by owners as passion (91% of the entrepreneur participants in the formal interviews reported themselves as passionate about gelato) and desire to inform and educate customers (100% of the gelato entrepreneur participants in the formal interviews agreed this). Was there pleasantness and caring in real time interaction with customers? The customers, by their behaviour and interactions within a shop might be a good guide to the wider cultural place of gelato and gelato shops, for instance how many Instagram pictures were being taken and exactly of what? Alternatively were customers present simply to consume a foodstuff or have fun and did not want to be educated? Observation showed that at the least most customers wanted information, though some were interested in gaining deeper knowledge of the gelato process. (100% of the gelato owners agreed these needs on the part of their customers). Owners always seemed enthusiastic, even passionate, but good at assessing the degree of interaction that individual customers desired socially, informatively or educationally and adjusting their presentation accordingly.

### **5. Discussion**

The gelato entrepreneurs displayed classic traits of artisanal entrepreneurship (Azavedo & Walsh, 2024; Watne, 2012; Watne et al., 2012) such as lack of concern to maximise income or profits and concern to educate customers and the last including not only through discussion but in one case a library and gelato workshops.

Generally gelato entrepreneurs were highly involved in extending their own knowledge of the subject to cascade to customers. This tended not so much to be through book-reading but hands on research and development (91% of participants in the formal interviews regarded innovation as important), mostly around recipes but also presentation. Customer opinions were encouraged not only to make a good purchase for that customer but for the entrepreneur to consider in the processes of product development, again typical in Artisanal entrepreneurship such as speciality coffee (Azavedo & Gogatz, 2021) and perfume and perfume-related goods such as scented candles

Gelato entrepreneurs had a sense of being involved in the gelato industry because it is on-trend in some way, but were unable to see specific alignments. Gelato entrepreneurs felt that gelato was unlikely to make them substantial fortunes but the trend in its favour meant that a sufficient income was likely. The idea of sufficient rather than maximal income is common in artisanal entrepreneurship (Azavedo & Walsh, 2024). In Thailand there may be specific drivers of individual artisanal entrepreneurs' attitudes and actions through the duality of teachings of Thai Buddhism and King Rama IX, the latter ultimately becoming particularly concerned with agricultural process and development.

Senasu and Singhapakdi (2017) specifically see a moderating role of religiousness. The latter is as a moderator of the determinants of happiness. Senasu and Singhapakdi (2017) further offer the view that this role is especially strong in Buddhist societies such as Thailand. In simple terms that might mean that, for instance, moderation coming out of Buddhist views, when adopted by the individual, may be an element in creating happiness. Buddha argued this in recommending a life that avoided extremes and was focused in the Middle Way (Leelakulthanit, 2017).

King Rama IX developed the Sufficiency Economy philosophy. This is based on tenets of the Buddhist religion. Specifically the Sufficiency Economy had as its Three Pillars moderation, reasonableness and self-immunity, the last sometimes referred to as risk management and a reference to building one's resilience, for instance through the pursuit of knowledge. King Rama IX thence developed his New Theory Agriculture, a comprehensive agricultural planning tool, out of the approaches of the Sufficiency Economy.

Entrepreneurs in this study did not appear to have considered Gelato beyond being on-trend so likely a business start-up that might well survive. There appeared no wider picture in their view, for instance in broader fit with other aspects of contemporary culture such as apparel or travel. Neither was there appreciation of Thailand's food history, including repetitive co-opting of overseas cuisines, Italian included.

However some of the questions or informal discussion in this study hinting in those directions prompted relevant consideration of customer interaction. Five participants regarded their customers as feeling some attachment to Italy or feeling broadly cosmopolitan through gelato consumption. Somewhat oddly a further two participants who considered their customers as not feeling an attachment to Italy nor feeling cosmopolitan then gave lengthy anecdotes about customers who had Italian travel experience, had eaten gelato in Italy and offered critiques back in Thailand. The discussion between researcher and gelato entrepreneurs seemed likely to stimulate wider consideration by the gelato entrepreneurs, including having been dismissive, if that were the case, of lifestyle elements which can often be easily co-opted into the gelato shop environment. There are though always constraints and in gelato those seemed to be physically small premises and lack of time, largely due to the gelato process itself being so time-consuming.

Similar constraints seemed to preclude great forward thinking or considering the future from the experiences of other relevant food and beverage enterprises, for instance speciality coffee, the latter often extending its offering as a pragmatic matter, a survival tactic. Arguably, it is better to future plan both in terms of scale and content of the future offering than engage in unplanned adaptive business behaviours. There was a sense of excitement in the moment that overrode future planning. For instance at this stage gelato places do not appear to act as third places (Oldenburg, & Brissett, 1982) to any great extent. Customers come along as single, in couples, families or small friendship groups and stay that way with no cross-pollination as in clubs, pubs, even coffee shops sometimes. The researcher heard or saw no plans or movements towards becoming community centres.

## 6. Conclusions

The Gelato entrepreneurs of the Bangkok area surveyed clearly fit behaviour and attitudes widely seen within artisanal entrepreneurship. The limitations of physical area considered must be remembered and no attempt to generalise from this study be made more widely for gelato entrepreneurship, even only within Thailand. There may or may not be elements of transferability.

Not only did this study take place in a particular area but also at a particular point in time. Future researchers may consider other times (for instance by season) and places as background to gelato entrepreneurship and also consider different methodology in the research model. This was a qualitative study.

Those are general propositions. A future study might be more focused in consideration of the nature of trends and the inter-relationship of components and potential components within a trend. A specific area for consideration might be social media use. Social media were used widely by participants in this study, but some refused to adopt even the most basic of social media marketing. Others showed marked reluctance, if only in terms of their time availability. Will these issues resolve over time? How do you promote gelato to a contemporary audience?

**Funding:** This research received no external funding

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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**Publisher's Note:** All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

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