

Sell What They Grow, Buy What They Eat: Changes in the Availability and Consumption of Food in the Central Thailand Farmers' Community

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ABSTRACT This study explores the dynamics of food insecurity among rural farming households in central Thailand. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in *Ban Khok* between 2014 and 2023, it examines how commercial agriculture, labour demands, and digital technologies have reshaped food production and consumption. Guided by the frameworks of food security and political ecology, the analysis highlights a shift from self-reliant food practices to dependence on market-based and convenience-oriented alternatives. The findings show that despite being food producers, many farmers no longer consume what they grow, leading to increased nutritional risk, chronic illness, and cultural disconnection. A local concept reflecting economic constraints over ecological balance exemplifies this shift. The study concludes that food insecurity in this context stems not from scarcity but from structural dispossession and loss of food agency. It recommends context-sensitive interventions that address autonomy, biodiversity, and climate adaptation within local food systems.

INTRODUCTION

Thailand's natural environment, including its fertile land and water resources, has historically supported strong food production. Rice cultivation, in particular, has played a central role in both the country's diet and its cultural traditions. The Bowring Treaty of 1855 marked a turning point when Thailand began shifting from subsistence farming to a more commercial agricultural model (Ouyyanont 2002). This change influenced farmers' lives and social systems, and gradually reduced their food self-sufficiency (Thongdee 2003; Baker and Phongpaichit 2014).

After the Second World War, Thailand, like many developing countries, followed a modernisation path promoted by international institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations. Government initiatives in the 1950s focused on infrastructure and economic planning. In 1957, a World Bank mission provided strategic recommendations on economic development, including agriculture, utilities, and education (Wongcha-um 2011).

However, these development strategies have brought unintended consequences for rural food

systems. The expansion of commercial agriculture has reduced biodiversity and increased financial stress for small farmers. Many farming households now grow crops mainly for sale, not for consumption, and rely on inexpensive, processed foods from outside sources. This shift reflects a loss of household-level food autonomy and increased nutritional vulnerability, particularly in rural areas of central Thailand.

National data during the COVID-19 pandemic show that over 28 percent of households experienced food insecurity, especially among youth and indebted families (Phulkerd et al. 2023). Changes in dietary habits, including increased meat consumption, highlight broader transformations in food systems (Board 2025). Even though rural populations in Thailand generally have good health knowledge, there remains a gap between knowledge and healthy behaviour (Bawornthip et al. 2025). Despite Thailand's strong agricultural production, millions still lack access to healthy food (UN Food Systems Coordination Hub 2025). While national-level indicators present a picture of abundance, they fail to capture the lived experiences of rural producers who remain food insecure. This disconnect

between high output and limited access reflects deeper structural issues that are often overlooked in macro-level studies, an analytical gap this study seeks to address by focusing on food-producing communities in central Thailand.

This study draws on two interrelated analytical frameworks. First, it applies the food security framework to assess the dimensions of availability, access, utilisation, and stability of food in a rural agricultural context. Second, it adopts a political ecology perspective to explore how shifts in agrarian structures, state development policies, and market dependency have reconfigured local food systems and diminished household autonomy. Taken together, these frameworks provide a lens not only to describe what has changed in food practices, but to explain why those changes have occurred and whose interests they reflect.

Objectives

The study was conducted to examine the food security situation in a rural farming community in central Thailand. The specific objectives were:

1. To examine the changes in food production and consumption patterns among small-scale farmers.
2. To identify the socioeconomic and cultural factors influencing household dietary practices and food access.
3. To assess the impact of commercial agriculture on household self-reliance, health, and long-term food sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore food production and consumption practices in *Ban Khok*, *U Thong* District, Suphan Buri Province. Fieldwork was conducted over eight months during 2014–2015. The methods included participant observation, informal conversations, surveys, mapping, and in-depth interviews with 30 individuals. These included 20 villagers from 15 households, 5 food vendors, and 5 local officials. Follow-up interviews with key informants were conducted in early 2020 and again in 2023 to capture post-COVID-19 changes. All participants gave

informed consent. Interview questions focused on daily routines, food access, dietary choices, work, and lifestyle. Key informants were selected based on their knowledge and willingness to participate. The collected data were analysed using content analysis to identify key themes and patterns. The research was approved by the Committee of Research Ethics (Social Sciences), Mahidol University (Project Code: MU-SSIRB 2014/325, COA No. 2014/302.0511). The study followed an emic, bottom-up perspective based on lived experiences. Data were interpreted using thematic analysis informed by the frameworks of food security and political ecology. Themes such as dietary change, household food access, and nutritional risk were examined not only as behavioural outcomes, but also as reflections of broader structural forces. These included shifting labour demands, market dependency, declining ecological diversity, and state development policy. This dual framework enabled the analysis to move beyond descriptive accounts and towards an understanding of how everyday food practices are embedded in power-laden agrarian transformations.

RESULTS

The results are presented in accordance with the study objectives. These include to examine the changes in food production and consumption patterns among small-scale farmers, to identify the socioeconomic and cultural factors influencing household dietary practices and food access, and to assess the impact of commercial agriculture on household self-reliance, health, and long-term food sustainability.

Historical Foundations and Agricultural Transition

The relationship between food and community in *Ban Khok* is closely linked to its historical formation and forced migration. The village was established by *Lao Krung* (ethnic Lao forcibly resettled in Thailand after the failed Anouvong rebellion, a Lao uprising against Siam, 1826–1828), descendants of those displaced after the 1826–1828 Lao rebellion, who settled in the upland forests of *U Thong* District. *Ban Khok* began as an extension of forest commons, a space

where rice cultivation, foraging, hunting, and community labour shaped both diet and social life.

Food in this context was not simply sustenance, it was part of ritual, rhythm, and resilience. Families gathered ingredients from surrounding ecosystems, shared meals across work groups, and maintained gendered divisions of labour that reinforced the centrality of food in daily household life. As one elder recalled, “We never had to buy food. Everything was in the fields or forest.”

Over time, this balance changed. Infrastructure developments, such as the construction of the Malaiman Road in 1958 and the expansion of irrigation networks, opened *Ban Khok* to external markets. By the late 1960s, influenced by Thailand’s national shift toward export-oriented agriculture, villagers were producing not for home consumption but for sale.

While productivity increased, allowing farmers to grow in-season and off-season rice as well as vegetables, this came at a cost. High-yield farming required more inputs, like chemical fertilisers, pesticides, and hired labour. The result was paradoxical, more food was produced, but less was consumed at home. Interviews confirmed that by the 1990s, villagers were buying food that had once come from their own land.

The shift from subsistence to commercial agriculture affected not only the economy but also reduced household food self-reliance and disrupted local food culture. What was once a cycle of community reciprocity became a chain of transactions, driven by profit, ecologically costly, and detached from local nutrition.

Socioeconomic Pressures and Consumption Behaviour

Although Thailand maintains a high national food self-sufficiency ratio, suggesting a surplus in staple food production, the situation in *Ban Khok* presents a contradiction. Households that grow food are no longer feeding themselves from their own land. Commercial agricultural practices, which rely on agrochemicals, machinery, and market-based distribution, have reshaped the local food system. Villagers often sell all their produce to wholesalers, only to repurchase similar foods at higher prices from outside sources. This cycle indicates not prosperity, but increasing dependence on external systems.

As summarised in Table 1, interviewees often reported a shift away from self-grown food, greater use of food delivery apps, and concerns about health risks from convenience foods. Rising input costs and soil degradation have pushed many farming households into debt, forcing both men and women to seek additional sources of income. In particular, women, who were traditionally central to food preparation, now work outside the home more frequently, leaving less time and energy for cooking. In this context, convenience food has become less a choice and more a necessity.

Interview data show a consistent theme, that is, economic and time-related pressures, rather than health awareness, drive food decisions. The decline of self-reliant food practices has led to a shift toward ready-made, processed, and app-ordered meals. This transformation is not merely behavioural, it is structural, rooted in labour demands, financial insecurity, and a broader trend toward convenience over nutrition.

Table 1: Key themes identified from field interviews

Theme	Description (from interviews)	Illustrative quotes
Shift from home-grown to purchased food	Households no longer grow vegetables, buying from shops/markets instead.	“We used to pick vegetables from the fields. Now we have to buy everything.”
Reliance on readymade meals	Time and income constraints lead to purchasing quick meals.	“There’s no time to cook, so I buy food from the market.”
Use of food delivery apps	Common among youth, especially during COVID-19.	“My daughter always orders snacks from Line Man.”
Awareness of health risks	People know market food is unhealthy but have few alternatives.	“I know it’s not healthy, but what choice do I have?”
Rise in chronic diseases	Reports of diabetes and hypertension are increasing.	“Many villagers have high blood pressure from salty food.”

Source: Authors

This pattern of consumption highlights the extent to which market dynamics and agricultural modernisation have undermined household food autonomy and nutritional wellbeing.

These findings reflect a decline in traditional food systems and growing reliance on external food sources. Economic pressures, time constraints, and shifting lifestyles have contributed to significant changes in dietary practices, marking a departure from food autonomy once embedded in rural household routines.

The Meaning of “Kin Ngai Yu Ngai” in Transition

The traditional concept of *Kin Ngai Yu Ngai* (eat simply, live simply) once embodied a philosophy of simplicity, eating what was naturally available, cooked at home, and shared among neighbour. It signified a life interwoven with rhythms of the land, where meals were humble yet nourishing, rooted in ecological balance and community ties. Today, however, the phrase has taken on an ironic new life, as it now represents a lifestyle of convenience, meals that are fast, processed, and nutritionally hollow, yet affordable and time-saving.

As one informant reflected, “*People still say they live simply, but that now means buying spicy soup and a cabbage from the market instead of gathering herbs from the fields like we used to*” (interviewed on February 19, 2015). Another added, “*It’s not that we don’t care about health. It’s that we don’t have time or money to cook anymore*” (interviewed on April 8, 2023).

In this reinterpretation, “*Kin Ngai Yu Ngai*” no longer refers to an ecologically grounded, culturally sufficient way of living. Instead, it reflects the act of minimising effort and cost in food acquisition, choosing meals that are fast, cheap, and readymade. Ironically, although food is more convenient than ever, it is often less nutritious, less safe, and increasingly detached from the local ecology. One participant explained, “*I tried packaged food, but it’s not tasty. It’s not the kind of flavour I prefer, so I don’t often eat packaged food; I just eat what I want*” (interviewed on April 8, 2023).

This stands in contrast to the past, when food, though simple, was freshly gathered, nu-

tritionally adequate, and socially embedded. The phrase “*Kin Ngai Yu Ngai*” has thus shifted from a reflection of abundance in simplicity to a symbol of economic constraint and nutritional compromise.

COVID-19 and Technological Influence on Food Acquisition

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a major shift in how residents of *Ban Khok* acquired food. Government lockdowns and emergency measures disrupted daily routines and accelerated the adoption of new practices. Food that was once prepared at home or bought at local markets is now increasingly accessed through digital platforms.

Mobile phones, already common among younger people, became central to food access. Platforms such as Line Man and Facebook allowed households to order meals and snacks online. As one informant shared, “*Typically, my daughter is the one who orders drinks through Line Man. She enjoys various types of drinks like frappes and bubble teas. The kids like to explore new food options*” (interviewed on April 8, 2023).

This reflects a broader change in food behaviour. Eating is no longer primarily linked to cultivation or cooking at home. Instead, it is influenced by technology, advertising, and fast delivery services. As another participant noted, “*You can find various kinds of foods at temple fairs or Facebook. People advertise their food products there. You just click and order. It’s much more modern than it was 4-5 years ago*” (interviewed on April 8, 2023).

Local Facebook pages, such as the *U Thong* Online Market, have become informal commercial spaces. These platforms combine social interaction with food commerce. The pandemic accelerated this transition, compressing what might have been gradual change into a few short months.

However, not all residents benefit equally. While younger and middle-income villagers adapted easily to online ordering, others faced barriers due to cost or unfamiliarity. As one villager explained, “*When we place orders, the prices go up...so we try to eat as economically as possible*” (interviewed on April 8, 2023).

In this context, convenience is not a neutral experience. It is shaped by income, time availability, and digital familiarity. Digital platforms do not only change how food is accessed, they also influence who can access what food, how often, and at what nutritional cost. In *Ban Khok*, technology has become an embedded part of food consumption, as well as a reflection of social and economic inequality.

Food Insecurity and Health Consequences

Although national statistics suggest that Thailand has achieved food self-sufficiency in recent years, field observations in *Ban Khok* reveal a different situation. Many households experience localised food insecurity, primarily due to limited access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

Data from the local health centre in Suphan Buri indicate a consistent rise in non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including diabetes and hypertension, since 2017. This trend appears closely related to long-term dietary changes. Traditional meals, once based on fresh and locally sourced ingredients, have been increasingly replaced by low-cost, highly processed foods. As one health worker explained, *“There are many people with diabetes and high blood pressure because of their high sugar intake... Some avoid fatty pork, but just end up eating more fried food instead”* (interviewed on March 3, 2015).

For many families, especially those with low income, convenience and price take priority over nutritional value. Packaged and processed foods, often high in sodium, sugar, and fat, have become daily staples. This is particularly noticeable among children and adolescents, whose diets increasingly resemble those of urban consumers. One participant noted, *“The children have become obese because they were eating just bread, like urban residents, and Western food prepared by their younger parents. They buy snacks and sweets every day”* (interviewed on March 4, 2015).

Although health promotion efforts exist, their effectiveness is limited by economic constraints. While government healthcare schemes such as the Universal Coverage Scheme provide free medication for diabetes and hypertension, preventive strategies receive less emphasis. Easy

access to treatment may lead to complacency in addressing root causes. As a result, food-related illnesses are managed medically but not prevented.

Interviewees acknowledged these trade-offs. The availability of inexpensive sweets and snacks, combined with the decline of home-grown food practices and time limitations, has created a long-term dependence on low-quality food. As one elderly woman stated, *“I know the food isn’t good, but it’s cheap. At my age, I just eat what’s easy to find”* (interviewed on April 8, 2023).

In summary, the health concerns in *Ban Khok* are not caused by food scarcity but by reduced quality and limited choices. Although commercial farming has increased food supply, it has also weakened the link between producers and their own food. The findings show how convenience-based living, social inequality, and gaps in public health combine to create food insecurity, not through hunger, but through chronic disease.

DISCUSSION

The concept of food self-sufficiency has long featured in Thailand’s national development agenda. However, ethnographic findings from *Ban Khok* complicate this narrative. While state-led agricultural policies have promoted productivity and export-oriented growth, they have also contributed to the erosion of household-level food autonomy. Despite producing food, many rural households no longer consume what they grow, instead relying on external markets for processed and ready-made alternatives.

From a political ecology perspective, this transformation reflects more than changing habits, it represents a form of structural dispossession. Market-driven agricultural systems, coupled with state policies, have increasingly alienated producers from their own food sources. In *Ban Khok*, food insecurity is not the result of physical scarcity but of diminished access, autonomy, and control over food choices. The shift from self-reliant production to consumer dependency illustrates how rural populations are embedded in power-laden systems of commodified food.

These findings extend the work of Phulkerd et al. (2023), who identify household debt, care-

giving burdens, and geographic inequality as key determinants of food insecurity in Thailand. While their study provides a valuable national-level overview, the present ethnographic data reveal how these structural barriers manifest in daily routines. In contrast, Cruz-Garcia and Struik (2015) highlight the ecological and gendered dimensions of food access through home gardens and wild foods, emphasising the role of traditional knowledge and seasonal adaptation. However, in *Ban Khok*, monoculture rice farming, chemical inputs, and labour migration have degraded ecological diversity and displaced women's food cultivation roles. Together, these divergent perspectives, economic versus ecological, illuminate how structural conditions reshape food access in multiple ways. This study thus contributes a bottom-up dimension to food security debates by showing how nutritional choices are embedded in intersecting socio-economic and ecological constraints.

The case also parallels findings from Kenya, where Oluoch et al. (2023) document the decline of wild food access due to commercialisation and weak policy protection. Yet *Ban Khok* exhibits a distinct dynamic, digital technology has accelerated dependence on external food systems, especially among youth. Food delivery platforms and social media marketing have replaced foraging and local exchange, reinforcing a culture of convenience while further fragmenting household food practices.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing vulnerabilities in food systems. As Sundram (2023) observes, the food systems of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) revealed deep structural fragilities during the crisis. In *Ban Khok*, this translated into heightened reliance on digital food platforms, reduced home cooking, and rising health risks, particularly among younger and low-income residents. These patterns demonstrate that availability alone is insufficient, as food access is mediated by technology, time scarcity, and structural inequality.

Recent initiatives in Thailand have demonstrated the benefits of community-driven food security programs (Khaenamkhaew 2024), highlighting how local learning strengthens resilience. However, broader regional research warns of the increasing influence of climate change on

nutrition in Southeast Asia (Ludher and Romero 2024). In parallel, technological innovations such as AI-enabled supply chain optimisation show promise in addressing structural barriers, highlighting an emerging shift toward multi-sectoral solutions (Chow 2025). Such developments invite reflection on how different scales of intervention, from grassroots to high-tech, interact with local realities like those in *Ban Khok*.

Such vulnerabilities are not new. While the Green Revolution significantly boosted national agricultural output, it also entrenched forms of dependency by promoting external inputs and displacing local food practices. These shifts were reinforced by mainstream food security frameworks, such as those advanced by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), which prioritise availability, access, utilisation, and stability. However, such metrics often fail to capture the lived realities of communities like *Ban Khok*, where the core issue is not scarcity but the erosion of food agency. This study shows that the loss of control over what is grown, prepared, and consumed signals a deeper rupture between agricultural productivity and household well-being, one that standard indicators struggle to represent. While these frameworks provide a structured basis for assessing food systems, they risk flattening complex socio-cultural realities into technical indicators. In contexts like *Ban Khok*, such metrics obscure local struggles over autonomy and meaning, rendering invisible the lived contradictions of being a food producer who lacks food agency.

This observation supports the arguments of Phungpracha (2012) and Tantivatanasathien et al. (2010), who advocate for a shift from national-level output indicators to household-based measures of food sufficiency. Isvilanonda and Bunyasiri (2009) similarly argue that farmers in highly productive regions often remain food insecure due to market dependence and policy frameworks that prioritise export over local well-being (Phungpracha 2012; Tantivatanasathien et al. 2010; Isvilanonda and Bunyasiri 2009). The present findings reinforce their critique that aggregate agricultural output does not necessarily translate into food security at the household level, particularly when local consumption is subordinated to external demand.

The local phrase “*Kin Ngai Yu Ngai*” illustrates these transformations vividly. Once a reflection of self-reliance and community-based living, it now signals a culture of convenience, shaped by mobile apps, packaged food, and the systematic erosion of traditional knowledge. The case of *Ban Khok* is not isolated, and it exemplifies broader structural shifts in how food is accessed, and how its meanings are reconfigured under globalisation.

These findings also resonate with Eriksen’s (2025) critique of diversity loss in the Anthropocene, where he argues that both biological and cultural diversity are increasingly diminished by globalised industrial systems. Eriksen introduces the concept of *semiotic freedom*, defined as the ability of communities to shape and assign meaning to their own practices. This capacity, he argues, is being systematically eroded by commodified food systems that displace local variation and flatten cultural expressions of food (Eriksen 2025). In *Ban Khok*, this erosion is not only symbolic but material. The loss of food self-reliance, and the replacement of foraged or homegrown foods with market-ready alternatives, exemplify a global pattern of disembedded consumption in which people no longer control what they produce or consume. What is lost is not merely diversity, but autonomy, identity, and ecological connection. Yet Eriksen’s focus on cultural semiotics may understate the material pressures faced by rural households, where daily food decisions are shaped less by identity than by exhaustion, time scarcity, and economic debt. This suggests the need to integrate symbolic and structural critiques in understanding food loss.

Building on this, Eriksen’s discussion of the “Creole Garden” in Seychelles offers a valuable idea for recovery, that is localised, biodiverse, and culturally grounded food systems that restore not only calories, but also meaning and agency. Yet while such models offer inspiration, they remain largely symbolic unless supported by structural change. In *Ban Khok*, the capacity to rebuild food autonomy is constrained not by lack of knowledge, but by market dependence, time scarcity, and policy frameworks that favour export-oriented agriculture.

Ultimately, the case of *Ban Khok* suggests that addressing food insecurity requires more

than improving efficiency or increasing production. It demands structural change and the re-embedding of food within ecological and social relations. This includes restoring food agency and recognising food security not only as access to nutrients, but as an ecological and cultural right, which includes the ability to decide what to eat, how to prepare it, and to do so in a way that is meaningful and sustainable. Recovery, in this sense, is not just a technical task, but a political one.

This contradiction is captured in the phrase “*Sell What They Grow, Buy What They Eat*”, which encapsulates the paradox of rural producers being structurally excluded from the very food systems they sustain. In *Ban Khok*, this is not an anomaly, but a systematised condition. The phrase, therefore, serves not only as a title, but as an analytical lens to critique the lived effects of commercialised agriculture on everyday food agency.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the paradox of agricultural abundance coexisting with household-level food insecurity in rural Thailand. Ethnographic findings from *Ban Khok* reveal how small-scale farmers, despite being food producers, often lack access to safe, nutritious, and culturally meaningful food. This disconnect is not the result of scarcity, but of structural forces, including commercial agriculture, time poverty, and declining food agency, that have eroded traditional food practices and contributed to long-term health risks. By integrating food security and political ecology frameworks, the study contributes a grounded, bottom-up perspective to current debates on rural food systems. It shows how shifts in labour, technology, and policy have transformed everyday food decisions and weakened local autonomy. Addressing food insecurity in such contexts requires more than production-focused solutions, it demands attention to power, meaning, and ecological sustainability embedded in daily food practices. The phrase “*Sell What They Grow, Buy What They Eat*” captures not only a contradiction, but a systemic condition facing many farming communities today.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving food security in rural farming communities requires policy interventions that prioritise household-level food sufficiency alongside national production goals. This includes enabling farmers to grow food for their own consumption, improving access to nutritious and affordable food, and reducing dependence on processed alternatives. Public programmes should also strengthen farmers' bargaining capacity, ensure fair pricing, and support local food systems rooted in ecological diversity and community autonomy. Concrete strategies include developing community seed banks to conserve local biodiversity and reduce reliance on commercial inputs, securing land access for smallholders to cultivate subsistence crops, and promoting food literacy among rural households, particularly women and youth, to revitalise traditional knowledge and improve nutritional outcomes. These efforts must be adapted to local contexts and integrated into broader structural reforms. In light of accelerating climate change, it is also essential to consider how global warming may further destabilise food systems and erode genetic diversity. Policy planning must incorporate climate adaptation through seed saving, ecological restoration, and community-led conservation initiatives. Further research is recommended to explore strategies for strengthening food agency and resilience in similar agricultural settings.

LIMITATIONS

This study is limited to agricultural communities in central Thailand, and therefore, its conclusions may not be generalised to other regions of the country. Although the main fieldwork was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, follow-up interviews allowed for some re-evaluation in light of the crisis. However, the findings suggest that the pandemic did not significantly alter the food-related behaviours and conditions observed during the original study period.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

VM designed and conducted the research as part of a doctoral dissertation and drafted the manuscript. LS supervised the research and contributed to the review and revision of the manuscript.

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