Flame it on the sunshine: Thai solar chicken a hot hit

Not many chefs don a welding mask before they enter the kitchen. But Sila Sutharat prefers to cook his chicken sunny-side up. Two hours south of Bangkok, Thailand, this 60-year-old roadside vendor has found an ingenious way to offer his customers something a little different. He cooks chicken by harnessing the power of the sun. Using a large wall of nearly 1,000 moveable mirrors, he focuses the sun's rays onto a row of marinated chickens. They sizzle away under the intense heat. Sutharat designed and built the solar-powered cooking device himself.

**Cooking Method Raises Eyebrows**

His unusual culinary methods raised a few eyebrows when he first hit upon the idea. "They said that I'd gone mad, that cooking chicken like this was impossible," he said. Sutharat stood next to his stall. The row of sun-drenched chickens behind him was too bright to look at for any length of time. "After a long time passed by, they'd say: 'Actually, you could do it,'" he added. That's because the solar reflector generates intense heat. It's easily enough to match an oven, with a sunshine-baked chicken taking just 12 minutes to cook through.

**Vendor's Viral Videos Draw Visitors**

For much of the last 20 years, Sutharat grilled in relative obscurity for a fairly local crowd. But after videos of his solar cooker went viral online, people from across Thailand have flocked to his stall in Phetchaburi province. Sutharat says the idea came to him in 1997, when he was struck by the heat reflecting off a passing bus. "I thought, with this heat reflecting from the window from the sun, I could possibly change it into energy," he said. Sutharat says that compared to a traditional charcoal grill — which he used before his solar epiphany — his meat is more tender and evenly cooked.

**Free, Clean And Sustainable Energy**

And given Thailand's sweltering tropical climate, the sun is a free, clean and totally sustainable energy source. "At the time, energy such as petrol and gas was becoming more expensive and suppliers were also running out of wood to sell," he recalled. "I thought if I used solar energy, I could save a lot. And it also decreases pollution." Sutharat and his wife Pansri now cook around 40 chickens each day. They also prepare several sides of pork.  "We've been eating here for a long time," said Thanyarat Kaewpaleuk, a regular patron. She was tucking into lunch with her husband. "It's delicious. His chicken is fatty, it's not burned and doesn't smell like a charcoal grill, which you can smell on the meat."