

The Influence of Local Food on Tourist Experience and Travel Behavior in Chiang Mai, Thailand: Insights for Sustainable Gastronomy Tourism

Kulrisa Srisangkaew*, Christelle Khamsing, Piriya Kittivoraphan

Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Martin De Tours School of Management and Economics, Assumption University

* Corresponding author e-mail: Kulrisasri@msme.au.edu

Abstract

This study examines the impact of local food on tourist experiences, travel behavior, and sustainable gastronomy tourism in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Specifically, it explores (1) how local cuisine influences tourist satisfaction and their willingness to make repeat purchases and (2) the motivations and travel behaviors shaped by Chiang Mai's culinary culture. (3) the tourist's decision-making, challenges, and opportunities. Additionally, the study provides practical recommendations for stakeholders to fully leverage gastronomic tourism within a sustainable development framework. The research methodology employed a qualitative approach using an online open-ended questionnaire survey to collect data via Google Forms to gather data from tourists who experienced Chiang Mai's local cuisine. The sample includes a variety of nationalities and age ranges, featuring purposive sampling with 20 participants mainly between 25 and 45 years old. In preparation for the pre-test, the questionnaire was reviewed by 2 academic experts in tourism and piloted with 5 respondents to ensure clarity and relevance. Minor changes were made to enhance the question structure. Data collection persisted until topic saturation was reached, indicating that no new insight into travel motivations emerged. Thematic analysis was then used to develop insights from the data. Findings indicate that authenticity, cultural immersion, and unique flavors determine engagement with Chiang Mai's gastronomy. Popular activities include cooking classes, food tours, and dining at markets. However, challenges such as hygiene concerns, language barriers, and limited marketing persist. From a sustainable development perspective, the study outlines three key dimensions: (1) Economic sustainability – supporting local vendors, strengthening farm-to-table chains, and enhancing regional culinary experiences. (2) Cultural sustainability – preserving Lanna cuisine, integrating food experiences into heritage tourism, and promoting traditional techniques. (3) Environmental sustainability – encouraging farm-

to-table practices, reducing food waste, and sourcing ingredients sustainably. To enhance gastronomic tourism sustainably, stakeholders should: (1) improve food safety and infrastructure for better hygiene and accessibility for tourists. (2) boost digital marketing by utilizing influencers, digital guidebooks, and social media to showcase Chiang Mai's unique food culture. (3) promote community involvement through storytelling, food festivals, and culinary workshops for immersive experiences. (4) create multilingual guides and programs to bridge language gaps and improve communication between vendors and tourists. These strategies can position Chiang Mai as a leading sustainable gastronomic tourism destination, increasing visitor satisfaction and fostering economic and cultural benefits. Future research should involve a larger sample size and quantitative methods to better evaluate the impact of local food on repeat visits and destination loyalty.

Keywords: Gastronomy Tourism, Local Cuisine, Authenticity, Tourist Motivation, Tourist Behavior, Tourist Experiences

Introduction

Thailand is globally recognized as a leading food tourism destination, attracting millions of visitors not only for its temples, breathtaking landscapes, and affordability but also for its diverse culinary offerings. As a significant agricultural nation, Thailand has effectively leveraged its food culture to boost tourism, further enhanced by worldwide visibility through social media and visual storytelling. Chiang Mai, the former capital of Lanna in Northern Thailand, is celebrated as a culinary hub. It features famous dishes such as Khao Soi, Sai Ua, and Nam Prik Num, along with lively food markets, cooking classes, and farm-to-table experiences.

The culinary tourism sector in Thailand is flourishing, boasting an estimated market value of USD 32.5 billion in 2024, projected to grow to USD 39.4 billion by 2034, representing an 18.6% CAGR (Future Market Insights, 2024). Although precise revenue data for Chiang Mai's food tourism is limited, the city remains a favored destination for food lovers, significantly enhancing local employment and economic vitality. In 2024, hotel occupancy rates in Chiang Mai exceeded 76%, with many visitors engaging in food-centered experiences like cooking classes and market tours (Walderich, 2025). Chiang Mai has established itself as a premier culinary tourism destination, making a substantial contribution to the province's economic prosperity. The province's tourism sector generated approximately 100 billion baht in revenue in 2023 (Nation Thailand, 2024). These trends highlight significant economic potential while underscoring the necessity for sustainable development strategies.

While progress has occurred, significant challenges persist. Many visitors feel perplexed by Chiang Mai's culinary culture, largely due to insufficient communication and a lack of multilingual resources. This confusion can result in misunderstandings of local dining customs and diminish appreciation for the cultural importance of

the cuisine (Ellis et al., 2018). Additionally, rising concerns about food safety, hygiene, and commercialization jeopardize the authenticity of traditional dishes. This raises a crucial question: Is gastronomic tourism in Chiang Mai genuinely authentic, or is it drifting away from its origins because of mass tourism?

This research explores tourists' views on local food experiences in Chiang Mai, aiming to understand how these experiences impact traveler satisfaction and repeat visits. It also examines the motivations and decision-making of food tourists. The findings promote sustainable growth in the gastronomic sector with recommendations for local stakeholders, including vendors and tourism promoters decision-makers.

Research Problem

Chiang Mai is famous for its culinary heritage, but the rapid rise of gastronomic tourism jeopardizes its authenticity, food quality, and cultural significance. A widening gap exists between what tourists expect and the genuine experiences they face, especially regarding hygiene, communication, and authenticity. Moreover, stakeholders often lack cohesive strategies to utilize food tourism for sustainable community development, covering economic, cultural, and environmental aspects advantages.

To address these challenges and bridge the gap between tourist expectations and sustainable gastronomic development, the following research objectives were formulated:

Research Objectives

1. To examine how local cuisine affects tourist satisfaction and their willingness to return for another visit or repeated purchases.
2. To explore the reasons that motivate tourists and how their travel behavior is influenced by the local food culture developed in Chiang Mai.
3. To understand tourists' decisions and identify the challenges and opportunities in the sphere of culinary tourism.
4. To provide practical recommendations that stakeholders can apply to fully maximize gastronomic tourism for sustainable development.

Research Scope and Limitations

This study examines the views of both domestic and international tourists engaged in culinary activities in Chiang Mai. It explores how food influences travel behavior and satisfaction, identifies challenges in preserving food authenticity, and offers recommendations from stakeholders to enhance sustainable gastronomic tourism. However, it does not consider the supply-side perspectives (e.g., from chefs or restaurant owners), and the conclusions are based on a relatively small sample of 20 respondents.

Literature Review

The terminology of gastronomy is defined as the art of creating pleasant traditional and cultural cuisine. Travelers are influenced by gastronomy tourism while making decisions for their destination choices to enhance their travel experiences. Thailand is a country with a strong culture where food is famous, especially in Chiang Mai, where gastronomy is highlighted for its local flavors and cultural heritage. Chiang Mai cooking classes have become a popular activity for tourists seeking new experiences in Thai gastronomy.

1. Definition of Gastronomy

The term gastronomy derives from two Greek words: 'gaster' meaning stomach, and 'nomas' meaning law. It is defined as the art of creating enjoyable cuisine. However, according to UN Tourism, gastronomy includes much more than food. It represents the culinary culture, traditions, heritage, and practices linked to a particular city or region (UN Tourism, n.d.). Tourists can taste local specialties that might inspire them to return. Additionally, it showcases how local cuisine reflects cultural eating patterns, serving as an accessible entry point to understanding the area's culture and offering insights into the foods that people cherish (Globaldata, 2024).

2. Definition of Gastronomy Tourism

The popularity of gastronomy tourism has surged in the travel industry, becoming a key factor in destination selection for travelers. Globally, the gastronomy tourism market was valued at USD 11.5 billion in 2023 and is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 19.9% from 2024 to 2030 (GlobalData, 2024). The Caribbean Tourism Organization describes gastronomy, or culinary tourism, as the travel arrangement to locations where local food and beverages are the main attractions. Statistics show that 15% of tourists base their destination choice on gastronomic offerings (Ullah et al., 2022), and the World Travel Association (WTFa) reports that 34% of travelers are influenced by local culinary culture when selecting their travel spots.

3. Gastronomy Tourism in Thailand

Gastronomy tourism in Thailand began in the early 1990s, gaining formal promotion in 2003 as 'Thai Kitchen of the World.' This initiative highlights Thai food globally and encourages Thai restaurants abroad to serve as information centers. The 'one tambon, one product' initiative further aims to increase the number of Thai restaurants worldwide and promote authentic Thai cuisine. In 2017, Thailand was recognized as the best street food destination, with a Michelin star awarded to a street vendor. The Second National Tourism Development Plan now promotes regional Thai cuisine, allowing tourists to experience diverse flavors. Gastronomy tourism supports regional culture through food festivals and culinary events, essential for the nation's appeal (Suntikul et al., 2020). Although, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted tourism, gastronomy tourism is crucial for revitalizing the industry (Kattiyapornpong et al., 2022)

4. Gastronomy Tourism in Chiang Mai

Furthermore, Bangkok is one of the most famous cities for Thai gastronomy, followed by Chiang Mai (Amazing Thailand, 2023). In fact, Chiang Mai, located in northern Thailand, originated from the cultural heritage of the Lanna Kingdom and is rich in culture. Lanna cuisine underlines the gastronomy of the northern part of Thailand. Lanna cuisine is characterized by particular ingredients and flavors, mainly featuring fresh local herbs, spices, and seasoning (Phongpheng, 2021). Chiang Mai is the city where the primary source of income comes from tourism and is the top city chosen for gastronomy tourism activities such as cooking classes (Suntikul et al., 2020). After COVID-19, Chiang Mai is trying to increase tourism awareness by using gastronomy tourism as its main selling point.

5. Gastronomic Experience/Immersion vs. Creative Tourism

Travel experiences are increasingly integral to tourist destinations (Soonsan et al., 2023). Gastronomy experiences, defined by Şahin and Kılıçlar (2023), focus on creating unique, memorable interactions with local cuisine. Zrnić (2022) noted that gastronomy immersion heavily influences tourists' perceptions of a destination, reflecting local culture. Memorable gastronomic experiences enhance a destination's image. Similarly, creative tourism, as defined by Richard and Raymond (2000), involves authentic engagements between locals and tourists, emphasizing cultural heritage, lifestyle, and local uniqueness, like traditional food and crafts. In 2022, the Adventure Travel Trade Association identified culinary tourism as one of the top 10 trending activities for tourists. This trend has led many foreigners in Thailand to seek local culinary experiences (Chidprasert et al., 2022). Srihirun and Sawant (2019) highlighted that food activities, such as tastings or demonstrations, embody creative tourism. In recent years, tourists in Thailand have showcased the local food experience through tastings and cooking lessons. Cooking classes are regarded as a sustainable food activity and represent an evolution in food tourism experiences (Suntikul et al., 2015)

6. Food Sustainability

The environmental aspect is an external factor that influences food innovation and production. Karagkouni (2012) noted that popular gastronomy destinations exhibit a strong sense of 'gastronomy patriotism,' connecting gastronomy with local culture and linking tourism to agriculture and food processing. Such tourist-friendly destinations promote local culture through gastronomic tourism, which encourages local tourism by innovating with local ingredients while preserving their specialties. The relationship between sustainable tourism and food creates an augmentation of local food consumption, which benefits the local economy (Torres, 2002). In fact, consuming local food indirectly reduces pollution, as local products do not need to be distributed to other cities or countries using modes of transportation.

7. Tourists' Motivation Towards Gastronomic Tourism and Preferred Destination

Motivation to travel stems from destination research. Gastronomy is a primary motivator for travelers, who seek pleasure and satisfaction from past experiences influencing their choices. For instance, a wine lover will favor destinations with renowned wines, attending wine events and festivals to learn about their history. People increasingly desire gastronomic travel, as cuisine shapes a destination's image. Thailand is known as the 'Thai kitchen of the world.' A key reason for choosing Chiang Mai, a hub for Educational Thai Culinary tourism, is its cooking classes offered at various Thai Kitchen Cookery Centres.

8. Tourists' Experiences Vs. Tourists' Satisfactions

Gastronomy tourism plays a vital role in enhancing tourists' overall satisfaction during their journeys by providing immersive dining experiences that connect food with culture and history (Durmaz et al., 2022). Furthermore, high-quality gastronomy tourism creates unforgettable memories (Komariah et al., 2020) and influences overall satisfaction (Cordova-Buiza et al., 2021). Satisfied tourists are more likely to share positive word-of-mouth and return in the future, with food quality being a critical factor in their satisfaction (Sutiadiningsih et al., 2024)

9. Tourists' Satisfaction and Revisit Intentions

Revisit is a behavior originating from previous visit experiences based on many destinations' variables (Seetanah et al., 2020). In addition, tourist opinions toward their decision to revisit a particular location are influenced. Sutiadiningsih et al. (2024) reveal that food quality is essential in a tourist's decision to revisit the place. In fact, the quality of gastronomy tourism influences tourist satisfaction, and a great, unique, positive experience will encourage them to engage in positive word-of-mouth to friends, family, and colleagues and decide on a return trip in the future. Repeat tourism is vital for sustainability (Seetanah et al., 2020) and has become an important factor in the growth of the tourism market (Singh & Singh, 2019).

10. Tourist's Experience and Revisit Intentions

Soonsan et al. (2023) confirmed that suitable experiences influence tourists' willingness to return. Positive experiences directly affect future visits. Similarly, positive gastronomy experiences enhance pleasure and loyalty (Björk & Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2016). Conversely, tourists with limited gastronomic experiences often feel dissatisfied and opt not to revisit. The literature reveals significant gaps in understanding how international tourists perceive gastronomic tourism in Chiang Mai. Most studies emphasize local gastronomy but lack insights into international tourists' perceptions, motivations, and satisfaction. In summary, gastronomy tourism in Chiang Mai effectively promotes destinations. Culinary experiences are a global trend, resulting in cooking classes and local food events that boost gastronomic tourism. Additionally, satisfaction with gastronomic experiences draws new

visitors and fosters repeat visits.

11. Existing gap in Gastronomy tourism in Chiang Mai

Chiang Mai stands out as a premier destination for tourists seeking traditional culinary experiences. Its authentic dishes, particularly Lanna Cuisine, serve as a significant attraction for domestic tourists and play a vital role in the gastronomy tourism scene in Chiang Mai. However, there is a notable gap in research regarding how tourists perceive 'authentic food' and how these culinary experiences, resulting from creative tourism, are influenced by cultural exchanges. Most existing studies primarily focus on the impacts of gastronomy tourism in less-frequented regions of Chiang Mai. Additionally, given new trends and changing tourist behaviors post-COVID-19, research exploring tourists' food preferences in Chiang Mai has failed to keep pace. Tourists may be searching for traditional dishes like Lanna cuisine, modern options such as fusion food, or culinary experiences that reflect their evolving tastes and sustainability.

12. Theoretical framework related to research objectives

The following figure shows a theoretical framework that highlights the approach to tourist behavior regarding gastronomy in Chiang Mai and examines the relationship between tourist satisfaction, experiences, challenges, opportunities, and their likelihood of revisiting the city. Influenced by authentic local cuisine, gastronomy tourism illustrates that individuals' primary motivation for visiting a destination is its gastronomic offerings, as these reflect the destination's image.

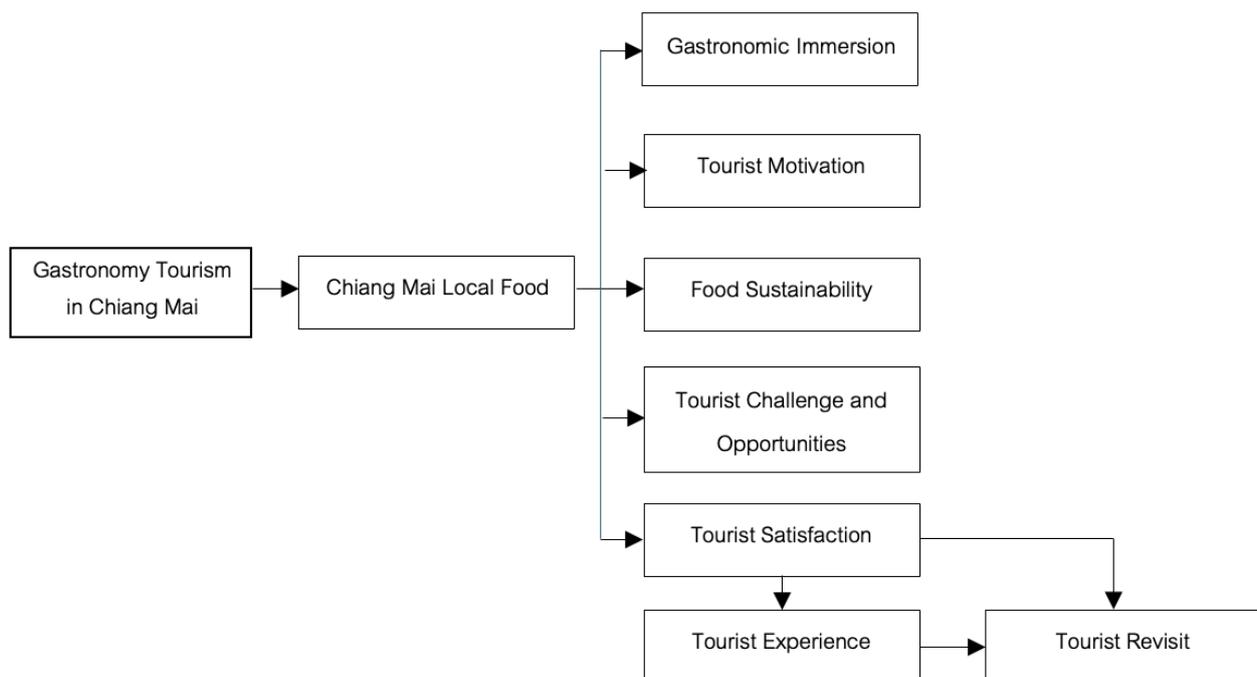


Figure 1 Theoretical framework

Within the theoretical framework, it is noted that participation in immersive gastronomic experiences, such as cooking activities or other food events, encourages tourists to choose Chiang Mai as their destination (Objective 2). Furthermore, the framework establishes a significant connection where an increase in tourist satisfaction derived from experiences with authentic local cuisine in Chiang Mai correlates with a higher likelihood of revisiting the city in the future (Objective 1). Additionally, challenges and opportunities relate to tourists' decisions to choose Chiang Mai for gastronomy tourism. Specifically, the challenges highlight that hygiene, food safety, and language barriers are three primary concerns for tourists that affect their purchasing decisions. Furthermore, a lack of guiding information is identified as a factor needing improvement to support their decision-making process. Conversely, the authenticity and variety of local cuisine benefit tourists when selecting Chiang Mai as their destination (Objective 3). The recommendation was suggested to enhance the preservation of authenticity, infrastructure development, marketing, and promotion (Objective 4).

Research Methodology

This study investigates tourists' perceptions, motivations, experiences, challenges, and opportunities related to gastronomic tourism in Chiang Mai. The goal is to develop recommendations for sustainable tourism growth. To achieve this aim, a qualitative research design was employed, allowing for the exploration of individual perspectives and experiential depth within a culturally rich tourism context.

1. Research Design and Rationale

A qualitative research design facilitated a thorough examination of the intricate and personal experiences of tourists participating in local culinary activities. This methodology was considered suitable due to the study's focus on motivations, cultural interpretations, and behavioral intentions, which are most effectively explored through interpretive and descriptive inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Integrating mixed methods may strengthen the core objective of this research, but the focus stays on qualitative approaches that provide rich, contextual insights rather than just conveying numerical data.

The research employed an online open-ended questionnaire as the primary data collection tool. This method seeks to obtain detailed textual responses from participants while providing freedom and flexibility in self-expression, all the while upholding the necessary structure in alignment with the research objectives. Unlike face-to-face interviews, the self-administered format via Google Forms offered logistical efficiency and enhanced access to participants.

2. Population and Sampling Strategy

The target group consisted of both domestic and international tourists who had visited Chiang Mai and participated in culinary activities. A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to recruit participants who met the

inclusion criteria.

2.1 Recent visitation: Participants must have visited Chiang Mai within the past 12 months.

2.2 Culinary engagement: Participants must have participated in food-related activities such as cooking classes, food tours, or dining at traditional markets and restaurants.

The final sample comprised 20 participants, aligning with qualitative research standards for achieving thematic saturation—the point at which additional data no longer yields new insights (Guest et al., 2020). The sample was demographically diverse, consisting of 65% Thai and 35% international respondents, primarily aged between 31 and 40, with a gender distribution of 85% male and 15% female. A majority (75%) were repeat visitors to Chiang Mai.

3. Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected through an online open-ended questionnaire shared via Google Forms, with distribution conducted through email and social media. Participants had a two-week period to complete the survey at their convenience, promoting thoughtful and reflective responses. The survey was structured around key themes aligned with the research objectives, including tourist motivations, culinary experiences, satisfaction levels, and behavioral patterns outcomes.

To ensure instrument validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by 2 academic experts in tourism and pre-tested with 5 pilot respondents. Revisions were then made to improve clarity, language flow, and alignment with the research objectives.

4. Data Analysis

All data collected through open-ended questions were analyzed into specific themes, which is how to define and establish important categories within the qualitative method. Theme analysis is popular for the qualitative method as it is flexible and systematic, and it also helps the researcher identify patterns and themes that emerge from the participants' perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The process of theme analysis was conducted in the following steps:

4.1 Familiarization with data and information: The researcher read and re-read the data to understand the answers' main points, perspectives, and patterns.

4.2 Establish the codes: Related information was highlighted and coded based on respondents' ideas and phrases related to their motivations and personal experiences.

4.3 Theme Formulation: To encapsulate respondents' collective experiences and perceptions, the preliminary topics were consolidated into broader categories, such as "distinct, authentic experiences" and "primary motivations of tourists."

4.4 Reviewing Themes: The discovered themes were evaluated to confirm their alignment with the participants' responses and the research objectives.

4.5 Themes Defining: The final set of themes was clearly defined and identified to provide a consistent framework for presenting the study's findings. This was accomplished by defining and naming the themes.

5. Trustworthiness and Data Quality

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, various strategies were implemented:

5.1 Content validity was established through expert evaluations and a pilot run of the questionnaire.

5.2 Triangulation involved correlating findings with relevant literature and secondary data sources.

5.3 Two researchers upheld Inter-coder reliability through independent thematic analyses, resolving discrepancies through collaborative discussions.

5.4 Transferability was improved by selecting participants from diverse backgrounds and travel experiences, ensuring a wide range of gastronomic perspectives were captured.

6. Limitations of the Study

This research provides crucial, in-depth data on gastronomic tourism in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Although there are some limitations, the initial process using purposive sampling may only be generalizable to tourists in Chiang Mai. Moreover, while the open-ended survey can provide comprehensive qualitative insights, it constrains the ability to assess the impact of gastronomic tourism in terms of tourists' behavior. Future studies may include quantitative methods to create mixed methods to gain both breadth and depth in more comprehensive data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Results and Interpretations

Violence can be defined as “the intentional use of tangible force or power, threatened or realistic, against oneself, another person, or against a community or group, such that it either results in or has an elevated potential to cause damage, death, psychological harm, mal-development, or poverty” by the World Health Organization in a worldwide public health problem report. Another description is the deliberate use of physical force or power, whether threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, a group, or a community, with the intent of causing injury, death, harm, or deprivation.

1. Demographic Information of Respondents

An examination was performed on the demographics of tourists visiting Chiang Mai, highlighting their age, gender, nationality, and motivations for travel. This yielded a thorough insight into their profiles. Of the total 20 respondents, the predominant group was aged 31-40 comprising 14 respondents (70%), followed by 21-30 with 3 respondents (15%), 51-60 with 2 respondents (10%), and a minor segment from 41-50 with only 1 respondent (5%).

Table 1 Age distribution of respondents

Age Group	Quantity	Percentage
21-30	3	15%
31-40	14	70%
41-50	1	5%
51-60	2	10%

Next, concerning gender distribution, a significant majority of respondents were male with 17 respondents at 85%, while females represented only 3 respondents at 15%. The nationalities of the respondents revealed that Thai nationals comprised 13 respondents at 65%, whereas non-Thais made up to 7 respondents at 35%.

Table 2 Respondents' demographic

Gender	Quantity	Percentage
Male	17	85%
Female	3	15%

Table 3 Nationality distribution of respondents

Nationality	Quantity	Percentage
Thai	13	65%
Non-Thai	7	35%

These tables offer a profile of the gender and nationality distribution within the sample of respondents.

2. Travel Information

From the data collection, 75% or 15 respondents had visited Chiang Mai before, while 25% or 5 respondents were first-time visitors. The duration of stay was primarily characterized by more extended vacations, with 55% of respondents (11 respondents) staying for 5 days or more, compared to 45% (9 respondents) who visited for a duration of 1 to 4 days. Leisure was the main reason for 75% of visits with 15 respondents, while 10% visited friends with 2 respondents and family, and 5% for business, education, or living purposes with 1 respondent. This data offers valuable insights into the demographics and motivations of Chiang Mai tourists.

Table 4 Frequency of previous visits to Chiang Mai

Is this your first visit to Chiang Mai	Quantity	Percentage
Yes	15	75%
No	5	25%

Table 5 Duration of stay in Chiang Mai

Length of Stay in Chiang Mai	Quantity	Percentage
1-4 days	9	45%
5 days and more	11	55%

Table 6 Purpose of visit to Chiang Mai

Purpose of Visit	Quantity	Percentage
Leisure	15	75%
Business	1	5%
Education	1	5%
Live	1	5%
Visit Friend and Family	2	10%

These tables provide a detailed breakdown of the respondents' visit history, stay duration, and purpose of visit to Chiang Mai, offering a clear picture of the city's tourist profile.

3. Motivation and Expectations

Based on the data collected, several key motivating factors motivated the respondents to visit Chiang Mai. The most significant factor indicated was Chiang Mai food, which attracted 9 respondents. 8 respondents answered that visiting Chiang Mai's attractions was a primary motivation to visit. This result answered the research question 2 – tourists' motivation.

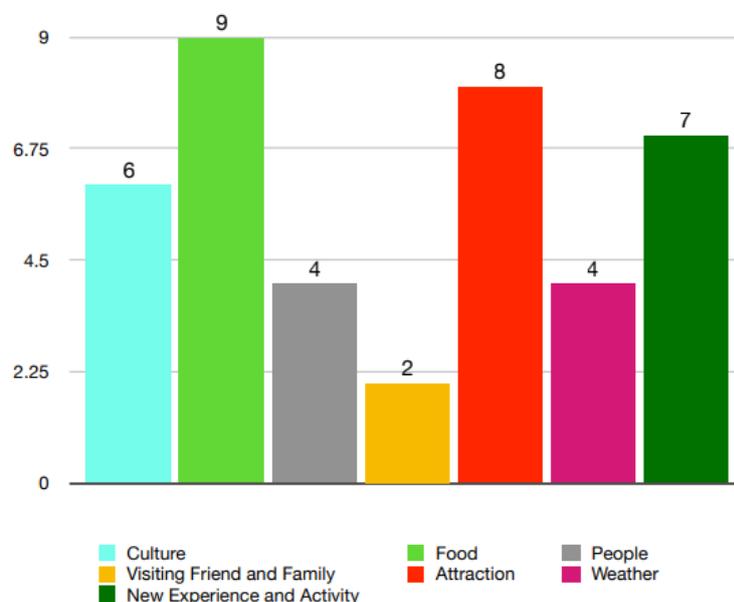


Figure 2 Tourists' motivation

Simultaneously, 7 respondents cited seeking new experiences and activities in Chiang Mai. 6 respondents highlighted cultural aspects as significant. The figure above illustrates the importance of local cuisine as a key motivator for respondents visiting Chiang Mai.

4. Memorable Culinary Experiences

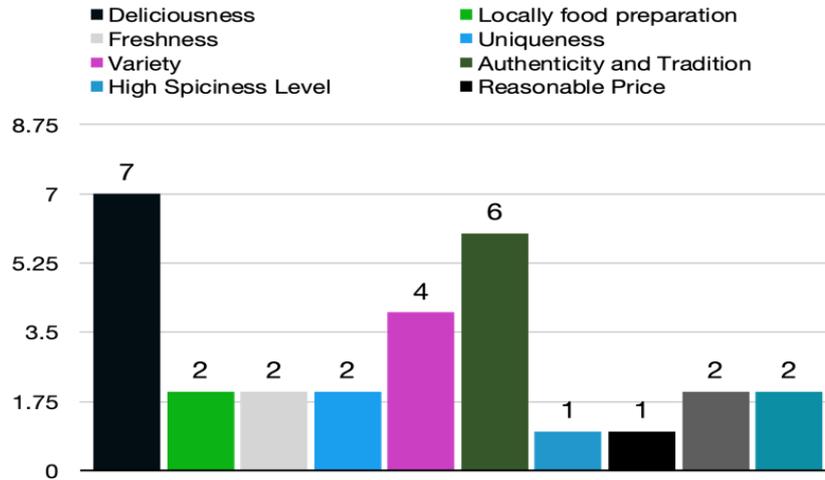


Figure 3 Memorable culinary experiences

The above figure reflects memorable culinary experiences in Chiang Mai; respondents highlighted the region’s diverse cuisine. 7 highlighted the food’s deliciousness as essential to their visits, while 6 stressed the importance of authenticity and tradition. Four noted that the variety of offerings enriched their experience. Furthermore, 2 mentioned unique preparation methods, fresh ingredients sourced from northern Thailand, and the health benefits of the food. Finally, 1 respondent recalled the high spiciness and reasonable prices of meals.

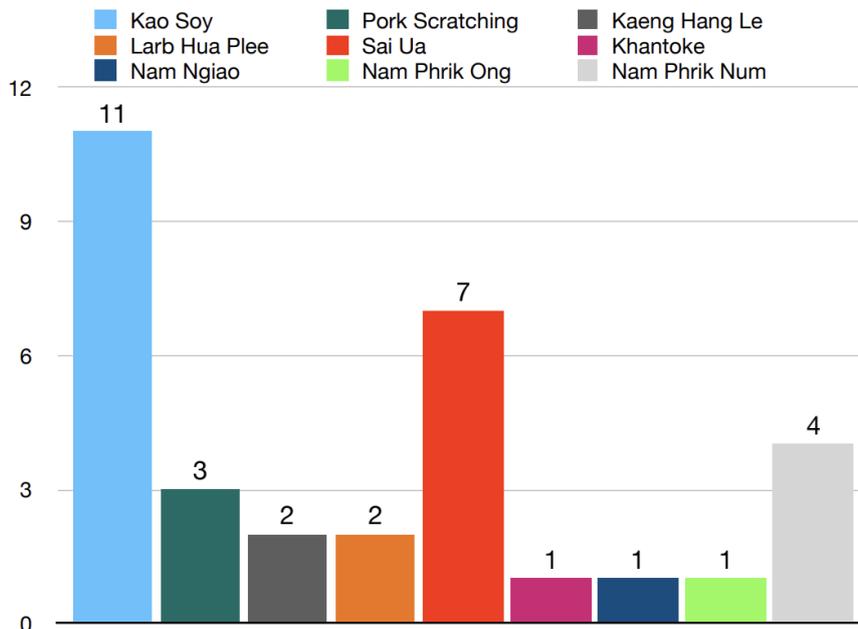


Figure 4 Tourists’ favorite local dishes

From the above figure, data indicated respondents' favorite local dishes. Khao Soy, a spicy yellow curry from Northern Thailand, was the top choice with 11 votes. Sai Ua, a spiced Northern Thai sausage, was followed by 7. Other popular dishes included Nam Phrik Num, a green chili dip, noted by 4 respondents, and Pork Scratching, mentioned by 3 respondents. Furthermore, 2 respondents chose Kaeng Hang Le, a Thai pork curry, and Larb Hua Plee, a veggie salad with spicy banana blossom. Only 1 respondent chose Khantoke, a mix of Northern dishes, or Nam Ngiao, a Northern stew with noodles, and Nam Phrik Ong, a pork and tomato dipping sauce. Next, the following figure shows several reasons why tourists enjoy Chiang Mai food.

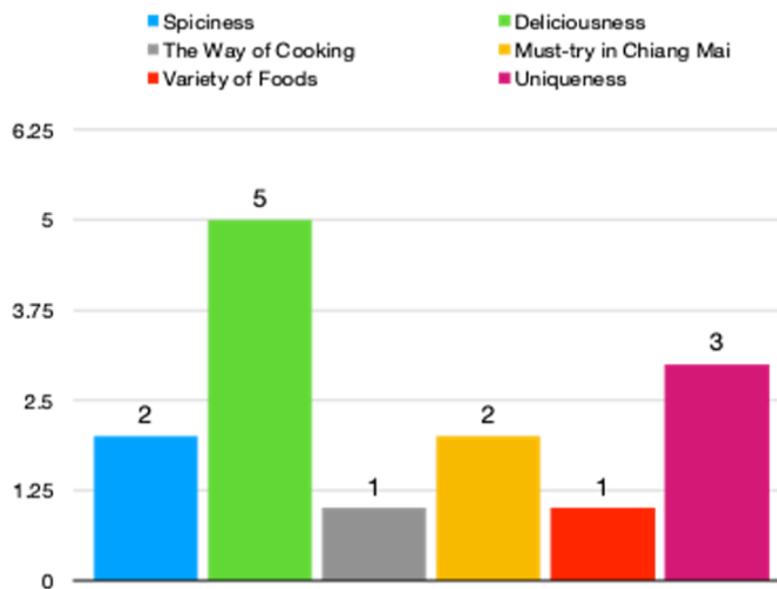


Figure 5 The reason tourists enjoy Chiang Mai food

Respondents were asked to explain why they specifically enjoy the foods of Chiang Mai, providing various key reasons for their enjoyment. The most common reason cited was “deliciousness,” mentioned by 5 respondents. Following that, 3 respondents highlighted the “uniqueness” of Chiang Mai food as their main reason for enjoyment. Furthermore, 2 respondents noted the high “spiciness” level of Chiang Mai cuisine, which distinguishes it from food in other Thai regions, while another 2 emphasized that this food is a “must-try” for tourists visiting Chiang Mai. Additionally, 1 respondent valued the traditional cooking methods used in Chiang Mai cuisine, while another appreciated the variety of dishes available during meals.

5. Food Related Activity

In response to the further question regarding their food-related experience from the total of eleven respondents who participated in food-related activities in Chiang Mai. The distribution showed quite a variety of food-related activities that the respondents participated in Chiang Mai. Cooking class was the most reported food-related activity that people participated in when they visited Chiang Mai by 5 respondents (45%), while

3 respondents (27%) mentioned that they often took part of food tours during their traveling within Chiang Mai. Additionally, 2 respondents (18%) participated in visiting farm activity as their food-related experience, and only 1 respondent (9%) mentioned “other” for food-related experience.

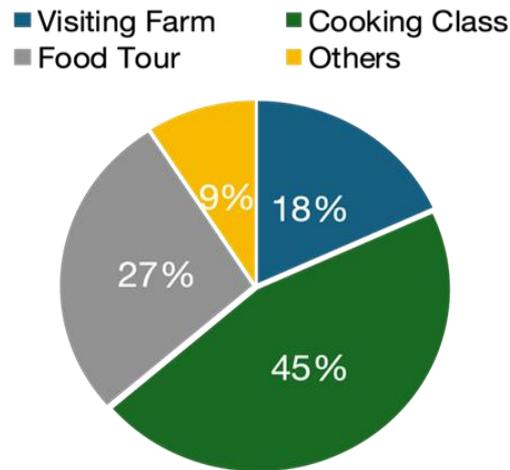


Figure 6 Foods relate activities

6. Local Cuisine Influences Tourists' Travel Experience in Chiang Mai

The degree of influence of the local cuisine in shaping the overall travel experience in Chiang Mai was assessed. Most respondents highlighted that the local cuisine significantly impacts their travel experience in Chiang Mai by 15 respondents (75%). While 3 respondents (15%) mentioned a moderate influence. Lastly, only 2 respondents (10%) reported that their travel experience had no relationship or engagement with local cuisine.

Table 7 Local cuisine influence on travel experience

How did local cuisine influence your overall travel experience in Chiang Mai?	Quantity	Percentage
Influence	15	75%
Moderate	3	15%
Not Influence	2	10%

A survey of 20 respondents revealed their expectations for the culinary experience in Chiang Mai. Overall, 9 respondents (45%) believed their culinary experiences met their expectations. Meanwhile, 7 respondents (35%) reported that the culinary offerings in Chiang Mai exceeded their initial expectations. Conversely, only 4 respondents (20%) said their culinary experiences did not meet their expectations. These results show that a significant majority, 80% of respondents, were satisfied with their culinary experiences in Chiang Mai, as they either met or surpassed their expectations.

Table 8 Satisfaction level

Did your culinary experience in Chiang Mai meet, exceed, or fall short of your expectations?	Quantity	Percentage
Exceed Expectation	7	35%
Meet Expectation	9	45%
Fall Short of Expectation	4	20%

7. Perceive Quality and Authenticity of Chiang Mai's Local Cuisine

The respondents had varied perceptions regarding the quality and authenticity of Chiang Mai's local cuisine. 4 respondents identified dining at local Chiang Mai restaurants as a key factor in recognizing high quality and experiencing authenticity. Additionally, 2 respondents pointed out specific aspects, such as the overall customer experience during meals, the use of locally sourced ingredients, the authentic tastes and flavors of the dishes, and the variety of vegetables in traditional meals.



Figure 7 Tourists' perceptions of the quality and authenticity of Chiang Mai's local cuisine

8. Local Foods' Role in the Cultural Identity

The role of local food in the cultural identity of Chiang Mai is quite diverse in the perspectives of respondents. The majority of 6 respondents mentioned that the local food reflects local culture to the other people. Moreover, 4 respondents further highlighted that the role of local food directly enhanced Chiang Mai's uniqueness and contributed to making visitors' traveling experience more meaningful and complete.

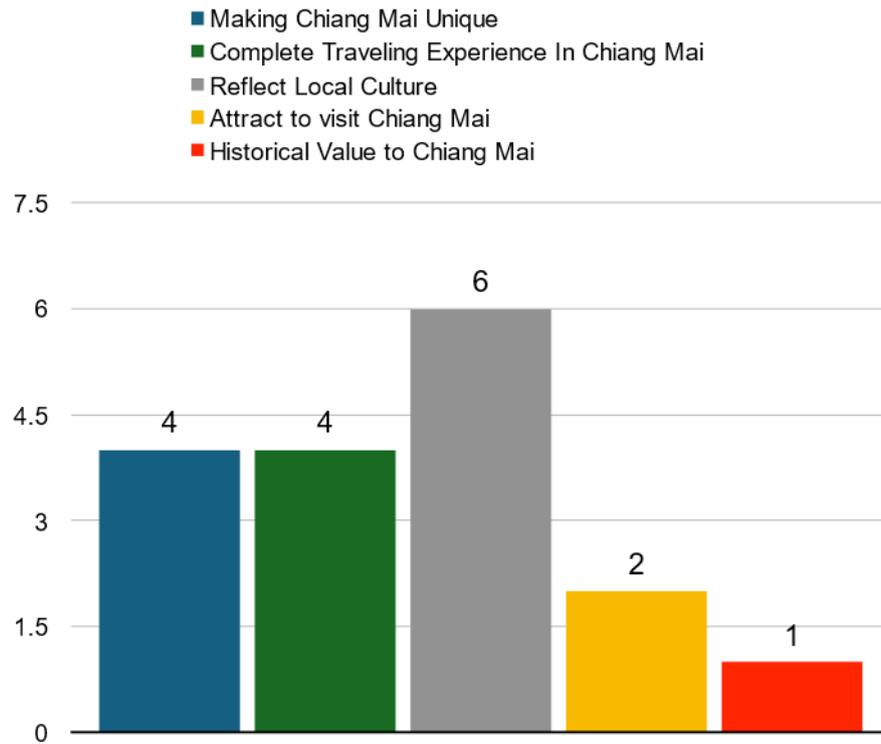


Figure 8 Local foods' role in the cultural identity

9. Suggestions to Enhance Gastronomy Tourism Experience in Chiang Mai

Various respondents expressed their views on improving gastronomy tourism in Chiang Mai. 4 respondents emphasized the importance of preserving the authenticity of local restaurants to maintain the traditional character of Chiang Mai's culinary and cultural heritage. Meanwhile, 3 suggested that Chiang Mai should create and update a guidebook explicitly tailored for international tourists to enhance their culinary experience.

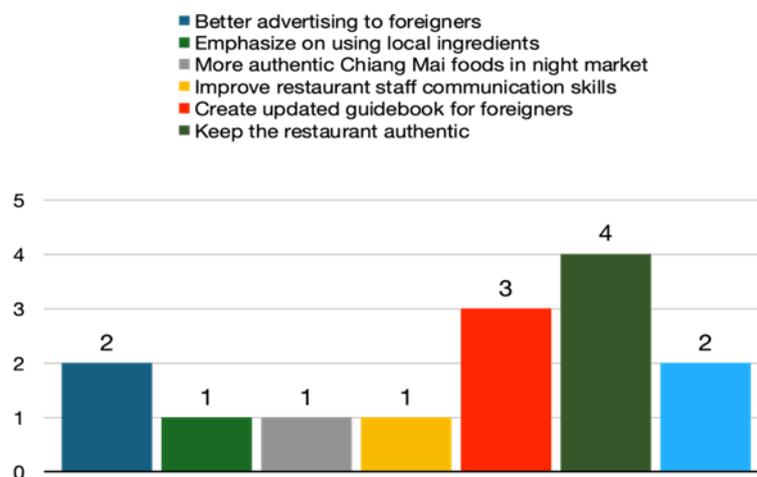


Figure 9 Suggestion to enhance gastronomy tourism experience in Chiang Mai

Theme Analysis and Discussion

Based on the participants' interview responses, the following offers a thematic analysis that correlates with the research questions.

Research Question 1 / Objective 1: How does local cuisine create tourist experiences and satisfaction leading to repeat visits?

Three main categories include culinary enjoyment, cultural reflection, and repeat visits. The following figure illustrates different codes generated from the theme analysis.

Table 9 Theme 1 tourist experiences and satisfaction

Theme	Key Findings	Sustainability Dimension & How
Culinary Enjoyment (Experiences)	75% of respondents stated that local Chiang Mai's cuisine significantly influenced their travel experience. Respondents' favorite dishes when they visited Chiang Mai were Khao Soi (11 votes), Sai Ua (7 votes), and Nam Phrik Num (4 votes). Respondents indicated a positive preference freshness of ingredients, variety, and food aesthetics of local cuisine at Chiang Mai	Economic: Revenue generators through food-related spending. Cultural: Conserves food heritage through authentic and traditional preparation and recipes from local Chiang Mai.
Cultural Reflection (Insights)	Most of respondents associated food with temples, traditional way of eating, and unique method of local food preparation improving the sense of the place. 6 respondents noted that food as a reflection of cultural identity.	Cultural: Reinforces cultural identity and promotes understanding of local traditions.
Repeat Visits	85% of respondents would highly recommend Chiang Mai for gastronomy tourism to others. Most of respondents expressed intent to revisit due to memorable culinary experiences such as deliciousness, variety and authenticity of local food in Chiang Mai as the important reason for returning to Chiang Mai.	Economic: influences the repeat tourism and long-term loyalty to local food-related and non-food businesses.

Discussion:

Chiang Mai, a city in northern Thailand, has become popular for gastronomy tourism after COVID-19 (Suntikul et al., 2020). Our respondents believe that Chiang Mai's local food is a signature of Thai Lanna culture and enhances tourists' experiences with authenticity and tradition of the foods and they also believed that food is

a reflection of cultural identity. In 2015, Khun Tok, a well-known type of northern dinner, symbolized a unique experience to tourists. However, by 2024, Sai Ua and Khao Soi were recognized as the top local foods in Chiang Mai. 75% of respondents immediately think of Kao Soi, Sai Ua and Nam Phrik Num when they visit Chiang Mai as the traditional food of Chiang Mai instead of Khun Tok, which is characterized as a luxurious, authentic dinner rooted in Lanna cultural tradition (Porananond, 2015).

Research Question 2 / Objective 2: What are tourists' motivations, culinary experiences, and how does Chiang Mai's food culture influence travel behavior?

Three main categories are motivations, memorable experiences, and behavioral impact. The figure above illustrates different codes generated from the theme analysis.

Table 10 Theme 2 tourists' motivations, culinary experiences and travel behavior

Theme	Key Findings	Sustainability Dimension & How
Motivation and Expectation	45% of respondents ranked from the survey that the foods and local cuisine were their first and top reason for visiting Chiang Mai. Motivation was supported by digital research and social influence.	Cultural: Promotes interest in traditional food preparation. Economic: Increases demand for local restaurants, markets, and cooking class activity.
Memorable Experiences	80% of respondents were satisfied with their culinary experience at Chiang Mai, and 35% of them said it exceeded expectations. Cooking classes were the top activity (45%) that respondents want to join, followed by food tours (27%) and farm visits (18%).	Cultural: Elevates food as a storytelling medium. Economic: Supports local culinary entrepreneurs and local ingredients.
Behavioral Impact	Positive word-of-mouth and emotional attachment to food preparation styles and unique cultural experiences (e.g., Khantoke dining, eating on the floor, and performance during the meal) shaped favorable behavior and complement the local culture.	Economic: Enhances spending and promotion via word-of-mouth both online and offline. Cultural: Reinforces culinary memory.

Garibaldi and Pozzi (2018) note that gastronomy primarily motivates tourists when selecting destinations. In Chiang Mai, 60% of tourists are attracted by its culinary scene, which is a major draw alongside cultural experience. Cooking classes rank as the most popular activity, enhancing awareness of local Thai cuisine (Fodness, 1994). Gastronomy in Chiang Mai provides memorable experiences with dishes like Khao Soi in a traditional setting. The quality and freshness of local food satisfy tourists, fostering positive travel behavior,

encouraging them to share their experiences online, and motivating return visits. The findings emphasize the crucial role of food culture in influencing tourists' decisions, motivations, loyalty, and choices for revisiting Mai.

Research Question 3 / Objective 3: What are tourists' decision-making processes, and what challenges and opportunities exist in gastronomic tourism?

The three main categories are decision factors, challenges, and opportunities. The figure above illustrates different codes generated from the theme analysis.

Table 11 Theme 3 tourists' decision-making processes, challenges, and opportunities

Theme	Key Findings	Sustainability Dimension & How
Decision Factor	Many respondents mentioned that their decisions to try Chiang Mai's local foods were influenced by taste, freshness, authenticity, and online reviews. Local food perceived as healthy, authenticity and diverse.	Economic: Boosts demand for local businesses through informed choices. Encourage repeated travelers. Cultural: Encourages preservation of authentic culinary standards.
Challenges	Hygiene and cleanliness issues (e.g., unclean vegetables), communication gaps (lack of English-speaking staff), and insufficient updated culinary guides. Some cuisine is less authenticity.	Social: Improves accessibility and inclusivity. Cultural: Improve authenticity. Environmental: Hygiene concerns relate to waste and sanitation.
Opportunities	Significant demand for food tours, local cafes, cooking classes, farm visits. Tourists highly seek curated experiences and the connection with local ingredients and cultural practices.	Economic: Encourages local businesses growth. Cultural: Enriches tourism with food heritage. Environmental: Promotes travel activities that are environmentally sustainable and have less ecological impact.

Discussion:

Past experiences significantly influence tourist motivation. Kovalenko et al. (2023) noted tourists rely on their previous experiences, whether positive or negative when deciding on trips. These experiences offer accurate information and filter irrelevant data. They also enhance knowledge and are vital for evaluating experiences. Repeated visitors generally perceive and enjoy city gastronomy more than first-time guests. However, hygiene, safety, authenticity, and language barriers can affect their choices. Despite challenges, 80% of respondents report no significant issues. Gastronomy activities are key in helping tourists create new experiences when selecting destinations.

Research Question 4 / Objective 4: What are practical recommendations for stakeholders to enhance gastronomy tourism for sustainable development?

Three main categories include preservation of authenticity, infrastructure development, marketing and promotion, and community involvement. The figure above illustrates different codes generated from the theme analysis.

Table 12 Theme 4 recommendations for stakeholders

Theme	Key Findings	Sustainability Dimension & How
Preservation of authenticity	Emphasize traditional recipes and method of preparation to stay authentic, highlight local specialties in night markets and local restaurants.	Cultural: protecting culinary heritage and identity.
Infrastructure development	Improve restaurant cleanliness, update staff training, and provide bilingual service and improve basic English communication skills for the staff.	Social: Improves visitor comfort and service quality. Environmental: Reduces health-related risks and supports kitchen hygiene and clean food practices.
Marketing and promotion	Utilize food bloggers, social media influencers, provide an updated guidebook of famous local restaurants for the tourists, and create visual storytelling campaigns to attract global audiences.	Economic: Increases visibility and reach of local businesses especially from online platform. Social: Builds awareness among diverse audiences.
Community involvement	Involve locals in gastronomy events, training programs, food storytelling, promote non-touristic areas to the tourists to expand civilization to the outskirts area and cultural exchange initiatives.	Economic: Increases local income and the creation of employment opportunity. Social: Encourages inclusivity and community pride.

Discussion:

Sustainable and gastronomy tourism are closely linked. Consuming local food decreases waste and pollution, avoiding transportation impacts (Sommit & Boonpaisarnsatit, 2020). Engaging local farmers and artisans enhances supply chain sustainability and regional economic growth. Marketing gastronomy in Chiang Mai is crucial to attract tourists. Events like 'Chiang Mai Gastronomy Culture' and activities at the 'Thai Kitchen Cookery Center' have raised awareness. Increasing local and international advertising for food tourism can elevate Chiang Mai's gastronomic profile. Highlighting local ingredients and culinary heritage can attract eco-conscious visitors.

Preserving local cuisine authenticity and traditional cooking methods supports sustainable tourism. Stakeholders should improve tourist experiences by ensuring restaurant hygiene and enhancing staff language skills for better communication with tourists.

Limitation

There are some limitations of this study, which involve the sample size, which is insufficiently small, only 20 respondents, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, this study used an online self-administered questionnaire, which limited the depth of probing and the ability to clarify responses, potentially affecting the quality of the data collected. Self-reporting may create biases, including socially desirable responses, which could compromise the accuracy of the data. These limitations could impact the accuracy and validity of the data collected. To address these limitations, the future study should be a mixed-methods approach, which should include a larger sample size and a more diverse sample to gain a comprehensive understanding. Moreover, the inclusion of longitudinal tracking would help assess how the development of food in tourism experiences evolves over time, providing deeper insights and understanding of the long-term impact and trend in culinary tourism.

Key Findings, Managerial Implications, Future Recommendations, and Conclusions

This study examined the experiences and motivations of tourists, their decision-making processes, opportunities, challenges, and stakeholder strategies for promoting gastronomic tourism in Chiang Mai. The findings specifically address the four research objectives and link each one to key aspects of sustainable development.

Objective 1: Explore how local food impacts tourist experience and willingness to repurchase

Findings reveal that 75% of participants consider food a significant part of their travel experience, highlighting dishes like Khao Soi, Sai Ua, and Miang Kham. Chiang Mai's cuisine's authenticity, flavor, and variety were frequently mentioned. Additionally, the emotional attachment to food experiences—from dining ambiance to traditional service styles—shaped positive memories and influenced intentions for future travel plans.

Sustainability Link:

1. Economic: Local food encourages longer stays and increased spending.
2. Cultural: Culinary traditions are preserved through continued tourist interest.

The research by Sutiadiningsih et al. (2024) established that tourists are likely to revisit the location due to the quality of the food, which also influences tourist satisfaction and experience. However, this study found that tourists are no longer solely focused on food quality. Instead, respondents indicated that other significant factors are perceived as important, such as the deliciousness, authenticity, and variety of food offerings. This

shift in tourist preferences presents a crucial opportunity for local culinary businesses to adapt their strategies in response to the changing demands of the new generation of tourists and enhance their potential for attracting repeat visits. Alternatively, while food quality remains a key factor in tourists' decisions to return, other influences also significantly affect their repurchase intentions, such as the variety of local food, perceived deliciousness, and authenticity of the culinary experience, which are becoming increasingly important.

Objective 2: Explore reasons that motivate tourists and how food culture influences their travel behavior

The data shows that 45% of tourists prioritized culinary exploration in their travels. They rated cooking classes, food tours, and interactions with local chefs highly. Key motivators included cultural curiosity, a quest for authentic experiences, and online research.

Sustainability Link:

1. Cultural: Tourists learn and appreciate local traditions.
2. Economic: Food-related tourism boosts the local service economy.

Garibaldi and Pozzi (2018) stated that when selecting a destination, gastronomy is the main motivation for tourists to travel to any particular place. Consistent with this research finding, a significant proportion of respondents reported that food and local cuisine were the primary reasons for their decision to visit Chiang Mai. Moreover, Tripadvisor (n.d.) supported this research finding, indicating that one of the main reasons tourists visit Chiang Mai is to seek cooking classes. This highlights that hands-on culinary activities and learning culinary culture from local chefs are important aspects of their travel motivations.

Objective 3: Understand tourists' decision-making and identify challenges and opportunities in gastronomic tourism

Tourists made decisions based on food freshness, authenticity, and peer reviews. However, they faced hygiene issues, authenticity, language barriers, and a shortage of up-to-date culinary information. At the same time, there was a strong interest in food tours, farm visits, and cooking experiences.

Sustainability Link:

1. Social: Improvements in staff training and communication boost accessibility.
2. Environmental: Promoting farm-to-table and local sourcing reduces carbon footprint.

According to Ham et al. (2020), decision-making processes align with the perceived value theory, where tourists weigh their expectations, experiences, and costs. This finding supports the increasing importance of digital feedback that impacts tourism decisions. The research additionally discovered that many respondents' decisions to try Chiang Mai's local foods were influenced by various factors, such as online reviews from previous visitors, taste, freshness, and authenticity, reflecting the growing significance of digital trust in tourism choices.

Furthermore, tourists perceived local food as healthy, authentic, and diverse, which shapes their decision-making. While several respondents mentioned concerns about hygiene and staff communication as challenges, this highlights the complex nature of tourist decision-making.

Objective 4: Provide practical recommendations that stakeholders can apply to maximize gastronomy tourism for sustainable development

The research identifies five actionable recommendations:

1. Preserve Culinary Authenticity – Safeguard recipes and food traditions to attract culturally curious tourists.
2. Improve Infrastructure & Hygiene – Ensure clean, welcoming, and multilingual environments for diners.
3. Invest in Digital Promotion – Use online platforms and influencers to elevate Chiang Mai's gastronomic visibility.
4. Develop Updated Food Guidebooks – Help tourists discover hidden culinary gems and understand local food narratives.
5. Strengthen Community Participation – Encourage inclusive tourism by integrating local producers and vendors.

Sustainability Link: These strategies support all four pillars of sustainable development:

1. Cultural: By maintaining identity and traditions.
2. Economic: Through job creation and small business growth.
3. Environmental: By encouraging sustainable sourcing.
4. Social: Through community engagement and service quality improvements.

Doxey (1975) established the Irridex theory in 1975 to analyze how local residents' attitudes towards tourists and their destinations have evolved. According to this theory, the final stage of the Irridex Model is marked by antagonism, where tourists are blamed for all negative occurrences in the host community. Moreover, the authenticity of local culture has changed over time. Luchaprasith and Macleod (2018) noted that traditional food recipes have been modified to align with modern consumption habits. To maintain the authenticity of Chiang Mai's food culture, upholding traditional ingredients and cooking methods is essential.

Additionally, enhancing hygiene and safety standards is crucial, as these factors significantly influence tourists' choices. Providing a food guidebook and creating an online platform for tourists to access information is also vital in raising awareness. Finally, it is crucial to bolster community participation by involving farmers and artisans in efforts to enhance the sustainability of the supply chain and promote regional economic growth.

Managerial Implications

To foster the increasing interest in food tourism in Chiang Mai, stakeholders must collaborate to create effective strategies that address challenges and enhance opportunities. The government, local entrepreneurs, and local communities should prioritize preserving traditional cooking techniques and unique foods.

Integrated strategies, such as Chiang Mai's culture and sustainable practices, must be emphasized to enhance marketing and advertising. Internet marketing serves as an excellent tool for reaching customers worldwide. Leveraging digital platforms and social media to showcase local gastronomic experiences aimed at domestic and international tourists can lead to enhanced global exposure; however, collaboration with influencers and food bloggers is essential for this initiative.

Furthermore, investments should prioritize elevating the standards of health and food safety that tourists expect. Training restaurant staff in customer service and language skills can greatly enhance the tourist experience and boost their satisfaction. Additionally, a visual approach is crucial for infrastructure development by creating guides and comprehensive maps for tourists. Introducing cooking activities and popular hotspots can foster greater engagement. This innovative strategy underscores infrastructure development through guides and maps tailored for tourists. Highlighting food festivals and popular attractions can elevate participation, but providing resources in multiple languages can also enhance the travel experience by appealing to diverse audiences travelers.

Future Recommendations

The following recommendations are suggested to foster the success of sustainable culinary tourism in Chiang Mai.

1. Collaborating with Global Stakeholders

The use of organic and local food reduces the impact of gastronomic tourism on the environment. Collaboration with cultural institutions and international restaurants will help tourists seeking immersive experiences. By organizing food seminars and fostering relationships with hospitality and tourism groups, along with international tour operators in Chiang Mai, we can enhance gastronomic tourism, especially for business travelers seeking diverse choices.

2. Technological Progression

The development of applications pertinent to Lanna tourism and gastronomy has the potential to significantly elevate the dining experiences of international tourists. An online reservation platform (which includes food reviews and restaurant suggestions) could, in fact, draw a larger number of visitors to Chiang Mai.

3. Expansion of Target Segments

Future research must, however, expand its scope to encompass a wider array of tourist segments, including families, business travelers, Gen Z individuals and solo adventurers. It should also delve into various cross-cultural factors to tailor experiences according to culinary preferences in distinct markets, because this can enhance overall satisfaction.

4. Mixed Methods Integration

Longitudinal studies can help readers understand how tourists experience the area and the factors that motivate their return. Furthermore, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods will yield a comprehensive understanding of tourists' perspectives.

5. Promotion Practice

Promote Chiang Mai as a new destination or tourist attraction in terms of food culture by opening opportunities for people in the tourism industry who have been affected to develop knowledge and improve tour guides, farmers, shop owners, and service business operators in Chiang Mai province. Moreover, it offers healthful experiences by eating food with safe ingredients and minimal cooking methods, such as visiting an organic farm.

6. Discovering Authentic Lanna

Present interesting or impressive experiences about cooking in the forest using natural ingredients and equipment, such as cooking rice in bamboo tubes, making local food such as bamboo chicken stew at Doi Pu Muen, etc., or present experiences of visiting hill tribe villages, including the culture and way of life of forest and hill tribe people that you were impressed with when visiting, and linking it to the food of the local area or tribe.

Conclusion

Chiang Mai's culinary landscape is vital to immersive tourism, enhancing local identity and promoting sustainable economic development. This study emphasizes that food transcends being merely an added experience; it serves as a major catalyst for travel and has a profound effect on visitor satisfaction and their likelihood to return.

This study enriches academic literature by enhancing our comprehension of the relationship between local food, tourist motivation, satisfaction, and sustainable tourism development. It highlights the relevance of experiential and motivational theories within Southeast Asian tourism and underscores the increasing impact of gastronomy on destination formation image.

Chiang Mai should leverage its culinary assets by building strategic collaborations among government bodies, businesses, and local communities. This strategy will ensure that food tourism is essential for cultural

preservation, economic stability, and providing memorable experiences for visitors.

Future research should adopt mixed methods to gain both broad and deep insights. Conducting comparative studies with other culturally significant cities in Thailand or the ASEAN region is advisable. It's also essential to explore how tourists from diverse cultural backgrounds perceive authenticity in their experiences. Moreover, investigating the long-term behavioral effects of culinary memories is warranted. Finally, examining the impact of artificial intelligence and digital media on food tourism is crucial.

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