

Menu planning as cultural negotiation: A tripartite study of Malay, Chinese, and Indian SME restaurants in Malaysia

Arina Aqilah Sukur¹, Mohd Hairi Jalis^{2*}, & Norzuwana Sumarjan³

¹Department of Social Science and Hospitality, Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology, Kampar, Perak, Malaysia

^{2*}Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pulau Pinang, Permatang Pauh, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

³Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Selangor, Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines menu planning practices among Malay, Chinese, and Indian SME restaurant owners in Malaysia, focusing on how cultural identity, operational realities, and market responsiveness influence decision-making. Using a tripartite comparative approach, qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with 13 SME restaurateurs representing the three major ethnic groups in Selangor. Thematic analysis revealed that while heritage preservation is a shared priority, the extent of menu adaptation varies: Malay and Indian restaurateurs tend to safeguard traditional dishes, whereas Chinese counterparts demonstrate greater flexibility and innovation. Cultural identity was found to function both as a strategic asset and as a constraint, shaping menu content, presentation, and willingness to experiment. These findings extend existing literature by positioning menu planning as a form of cultural negotiation, rather than solely a commercial exercise. Practical implications include adopting a dual menu strategy that balances authenticity with market appeal, leveraging digital tools for low-cost innovation, and designing ethnicity-sensitive SME support programs. This research contributes to theoretical discourse on SME restaurant management and culinary tourism by providing a multi-ethnic, culturally grounded understanding of menu planning within Malaysia's diverse gastronomic landscape.

1. INTRODUCTION

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) form the backbone of Malaysia's economy, contributing 36.6% to GDP, employing 48% of the workforce, and comprising over 97% of all registered businesses (Auzzir et

^{2*}Corresponding author. *E-mail address:* mohdhairijalis@uitm.edu.my

al., 2018; SME Corp Malaysia, 2023). Within this broad landscape, the food and beverage (F&B) sector has emerged as both a significant economic contributor and a cultural custodian. In 2022, the sector generated RM228.66 billion in revenue and is projected to expand at an annual growth rate of 7.95% between 2023 and 2027 (Rahman & Omar, 2021; Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024). Such growth underscores not only its commercial potential but also its role in sustaining Malaysia's rich culinary heritage.

Ethnic restaurants play a particularly important role in this ecosystem. They act as living repositories of cultural identity, transmitting heritage through flavours, presentation styles, and dining rituals (Aybek & Özdemir, 2022; Abidin et al., 2020). Malaysia's gastronomy shaped by centuries of migration, cultural blending, and adaptation, mirrors the country's tripartite ethnic composition: Malay, Chinese, and Indian (Nahar et al., 2018; Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). In recognition of this, government-led strategies, such as the Malaysia Tourism Transformation Plan and various gastronomic tourism campaigns, have positioned local cuisine as a strategic tool to attract both domestic and international visitors (Ishak et al., 2023; Roslan, 2021; Osman et al., 2021). Beyond tourism, scholars argue that local food heritage serves as a form of cultural diplomacy, enhancing the nation's soft power and global visibility (Jalis, et al., 2024; Sukur et al., 2024).

However, despite this socio-cultural and economic potential, SME restaurants that specialise in local Malaysian food continue to face persistent challenges in menu planning. Several studies highlight that these establishments tend to rely on intuition, inherited recipes, and informal experimentation rather than structured, evidence-based approaches (Mutlu et al., 2022; Fuzi, 2021). While such practices safeguard authenticity, they can also constrain adaptability to changing consumer preferences, competitive market pressures, and operational uncertainties (Surangi & Ekanayake, 2022; Tomalia et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, intensified operational pressures, forcing many SMEs to streamline menus, adjust sourcing strategies, or adopt digital ordering systems often without the benefit of formal training or market analytics (Khoirunnisa et al., 2022).

The academic literature reflects a similar imbalance. The majority of studies on menu planning focus on large-scale or international chain restaurants, where formalised menu engineering and market research are standard practice (Özdemir & Çalışkan, 2014; Patel & Dash, 2022). In contrast, the nuanced, resource-constrained, and culturally embedded practices of Malaysian SME restaurateurs remain underexplored. Even within the limited SME research, there is a lack of ethnic-specific insights into how cultural identity intersects with operational decision-making in menu planning. Given that Malaysia's multicultural gastronomy is both a domestic identity marker and an international tourism asset (Jalis et al., 2021; Jalis et al., 2020), this omission represents a critical gap in both scholarship and practice.

Addressing this gap, the present study aims to investigate the menu planning practices of SME restaurateurs representing Malaysia's three major ethnic groups Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Specifically, the study seeks to find an answer on how SME restaurateurs plan their menus in their restaurant. By adopting a tripartite perspective, the research examines how cultural identity, market responsiveness, innovation, operational adaptation, and emotional commitment interact in shaping menu decisions. This approach not only provides a richer understanding of SME operations in a multicultural foodscape but also offers practical insights for policy-makers, industry bodies, and entrepreneurs seeking to enhance the sustainability and

competitiveness of local food enterprises. In doing so, the study responds to calls for more context-specific, culturally sensitive research that bridges the gap between tradition and modern market demands in Malaysia's SME F&B sector.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysian F&B Sector

SMEs are widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of Malaysia's economy, contributing 36.6% to GDP, employing nearly half the workforce, and accounting for over 97% of all business establishments (Auzzir et al., 2018; SME Corp Malaysia, 2023). Within this ecosystem, the food and beverage (F&B) sector holds a dual role: driving economic growth while safeguarding cultural heritage. In 2022, it generated RM228.66 billion in revenue and is projected to grow at 7.95% annually from 2023 to 2027 (Rahman & Omar, 2021; Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024).

This sector is characterised by diversity in dining formats, ranging from fine dining to ethnic restaurants (Lee et al., 2016). Ethnic restaurants are particularly significant, as they embody and communicate the cultural identities of Malaysia's multiethnic population (Aybek & Özdemir, 2022; Abidin et al., 2020). These businesses not only cater to local customers but also serve as an entry point for culinary tourism, aligning with national strategies such as the Malaysia Tourism Transformation Plan (Ishak et al., 2023; Roslan, 2021).

Yet, despite their socio-cultural value, SME restaurants face persistent structural challenges. Limited financial capital, reliance on owner-driven decision-making, and lack of formal management systems make them vulnerable to market volatility (Surangi & Ekanayake, 2022; Khoirunnisa et al., 2022). As Jalis et al. (2024) note, while many SME restaurateurs see themselves as custodians of local cuisine, few systematically integrate heritage into strategic planning. This tension between cultural preservation and commercial competitiveness frames the operational reality in which menu planning occurs.

2.2 Menu Planning in SME Restaurants

Menu planning is a strategic and operational process that integrates culinary creativity, resource management, and market positioning (Özdemir & Çalışkan, 2014; Patel & Dash, 2022). In theory, it should align with a restaurant's brand identity, customer expectations, and operational capacity while driving profitability (Kivela, 1997; LeBruto et al., 1995). In practice, especially among SMEs, this process is often informal. Many owners rely on intuition, personal experience, and customer feedback rather than formal analytics or menu engineering frameworks (Fuzi, 2021; Mutlu et al., 2022).

This informality has advantages and drawbacks. On the one hand, it preserves authenticity and allows for quick adaptation. On the other, it limits the ability to systematically evaluate menu performance or anticipate shifts in consumer behaviour (Tomalia et al., 2024). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many SMEs to simplify menus, adjust portion sizes, and modify sourcing strategies to maintain viability (Khoirunnisa et al., 2022). Without structured planning, these changes were reactive rather than strategic.

Jalis et al. (2020) observes that in the Malaysian context, menu planning for local cuisine is shaped not only by market forces but also by the need to maintain cultural authenticity. This dual imperative can create

tensions, restaurateurs may struggle to innovate without compromising tradition. The absence of comparative research across ethnic groups further limits understanding of how different cultural logics influence menu design in SMEs.

2.3 Cultural Identity and Local Malaysian Food

Local Malaysian food is more than a collection of dishes; it is a symbol of ethnic identity, historical continuity, and social belonging (Abidin et al., 2020; Bessi re, 1998). Rooted in the country's demographic composition, with Malays forming 69.9% of the population, Chinese 22.8%, and Indians 6.6% (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022) The national cuisine reflects centuries of migration, adaptation, and intercultural exchange (Nahar et al., 2018).

From a tourism perspective, local cuisine functions as a marker of authenticity, enhancing a destination's appeal (Osman et al., 2021). Jalis et al. (2024) argues that culinary heritage can be leveraged as a strategic marketing tool to promote Malaysia's multicultural identity globally. However, heritage-driven menu planning is not merely about preserving recipes; it involves curating a dining experience that resonates with cultural narratives, sensory expectations, and symbolic meanings.

Despite its strategic value, the integration of cultural identity into menu planning is inconsistent. Some SMEs embed their heritage deeply into their brand, while others dilute it to cater to broader markets (Khoirunnisa et al., 2022). Jalis et al. (2024) highlight that even among restaurateurs who view themselves as cultural custodians, menu design decisions are often ad hoc, shaped by immediate operational concerns rather than long-term cultural positioning. This gap between cultural potential and strategic execution underscores the need for research that examines menu planning through a cultural lens, particularly in multiethnic settings.

2.4 Innovation, Learning, and Market Responsiveness

Innovation in SME restaurants often emerges from necessity rather than formal R&D. Restaurateurs experiment with recipes, adopt new cooking methods, and respond to customer feedback in real time (De Massis et al., 2016; Ahmad, 2020). This iterative, experience-based approach can yield highly personalised menus, but its lack of structure limits scalability and consistency.

Digital platforms have opened new avenues for menu innovation, customer engagement, and brand storytelling. Jalis et al. (2021) demonstrates that social media and mobile applications can be powerful tools for educating consumers about local cuisine and enhancing brand visibility. However, most SMEs use these tools informally, without linking digital engagement to systematic menu planning or performance evaluation.

Market responsiveness is the ability to sense and respond to consumer preferences that is essential for competitiveness (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). In multicultural contexts, this involves balancing tradition with adaptation. For example, a restaurant may retain core heritage dishes while adjusting flavour profiles or presentation to suit local palates. The challenge lies in doing so strategically, ensuring that adaptation enhances rather than erodes cultural authenticity.

2.5 Research Gap

The literature affirms the centrality of menu planning in determining SME restaurant performance and cultural relevance, yet three critical gaps persist. First, most existing research focuses on large or chain restaurants, leaving SME-specific practices underexplored (Mutlu et al., 2022; Tomalia et al., 2024). Second, there is limited understanding of how ethnic identity shapes menu planning decisions in SMEs, despite its evident influence on customer engagement and brand positioning (Syukur et al., 2024; Jalis et al., 2020). Third, few studies adopt a comparative, tripartite perspective that examines the intersections of culture, market responsiveness, and operational adaptation.

Addressing these gaps, the present study offers a culturally nuanced, context-specific analysis of menu planning among Malay, Chinese, and Indian SME restaurateurs in Malaysia. Such insights can inform both academic theory and practical strategies for enhancing SME competitiveness while safeguarding culinary heritage.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to examine the process of planning the SME restaurant's food menu that offer local Malaysian food. A phenomenological approach and a cross-sectional design were adopted to explore the lived experiences of restaurateurs, with data collected at a single point in time.

The target population comprised SME restaurants registered under SME Corporation Malaysia in Selangor. Selangor was selected as the research site due to its significant economic contribution to Malaysia's foodservice sector. The state records the highest gross profit in the foodservice industry, totalling approximately RM20,964,570 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). This strong economic performance indicates a highly active and competitive restaurant environment, making Selangor a suitable context for examining diverse menu planning practices among SME restaurateurs. A total of 13 informants participated in the study, consisting of four Malay, six Chinese, and three Indian restaurant owners or managers. This sample size was deemed sufficient as data saturation had been achieved, with responses becoming repetitive and consistent. This aligns with recommendations by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) and Squire et al. (2024), who suggest that saturation in qualitative research is typically reached within 12 interviews, particularly when participants share similar backgrounds and contexts. Other studies have also supported this range, noting that thematic saturation is often reached with a similar number of interviews (McCadden et al., 2020). The ethnic composition of informants ensured meaningful representation of Malaysia's three major ethnic groups and provided rich qualitative insights into the process of planning the SME restaurant's food menu that offer local Malaysian food.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability technique aimed at ensuring alignment with the research objective. Eligible restaurants had to meet the SME definition by SME Corp Malaysia (2023), which includes a sales turnover not exceeding MYR 20 million or fewer than 75 full-time employees. In addition, the restaurants had to primarily serve local Malaysian food, locally owned by Malay, Chinese, or Indian entrepreneurs, and have been in operation for at least three years.

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method. Interview questions were adapted from prior studies (Arsat et al., 2023; Khoirunnisa et al., 2022; Devi et al., 2021; Ge & Mahmud, 2021; Thabit & Raewf, 2018). Interviews were conducted in both English and Malay to accommodate language preferences. Data collection occurred over a three-month period, from May to July 2024. Initial contact with participants was made via phone calls, during which the purpose of the study was explained and informed consent obtained. Interview appointments were scheduled based on the availability of the informants.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and insights related to the process of planning the SME restaurant's food menu that offer local Malaysian food. This method facilitated a deeper understanding of how restaurants responded to customer preferences, cultural identities, and market demands, particularly from a tripartite perspective representing Malay, Chinese, and Indian restaurateurs. Interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim using *Turboscribe.ai* and manually checked for accuracy. Coding and theme development were conducted using *NVivo* software, following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Emergent themes included the use of local ingredients, cultural storytelling, menu customization, customer feedback, and strategies for customer engagement, all of which reflect how SME restaurants adapt their menus to local tastes.

In parallel, the study maintained strict ethical standards. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). All instruments including the Participant Information Sheet, Informed Consent Form, and interview protocols were prepared in both English and Malay. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. Data were securely stored and handled in compliance with REC protocols. The combination of rigorous data analysis and strong ethical governance enhanced the study's credibility and provided valuable insights into the menu planning practices of SME restaurants.

4. FINDINGS

This study examined the menu planning practices of Malay, Chinese, and Indian SME restaurant owners in Malaysia, focusing on how cultural identity, operational considerations, and market responsiveness influence decision-making. Across all three groups, the findings reveal a complex interplay between heritage preservation and adaptation to consumer demand. While each ethnic group exhibited distinct cultural priorities, all faced similar operational constraints such as rising ingredient costs, staffing limitations, and the need to balance authenticity with profitability.

These results align with Jalis et al. (2024), who argues that local Malaysian cuisine functions both as a cultural artefact and a marketable product, making its preservation a matter of both identity and economic strategy. However, the tripartite comparison in this study provides fresh insight into how these priorities manifest differently across ethnic contexts, filling a gap identified in earlier SME literature (Mutlu et al., 2022; Tomalia et al., 2024).

4.1 Menu Planning Practices among SME Restaurateurs

The study revealed that Malay restaurateurs primarily designed their menus around local taste preferences, ensuring that offerings aligned closely with the expectations of their immediate customer base. In contrast, Chinese restaurateurs tended to emphasize their personal involvement in specific dishes when developing menus, whereas Indian restaurateurs highlighted the strong influence of South Indian heritage, with an emphasis on preserving cultural identity through food. A shared characteristic between the Chinese and Indian restaurateurs was the reliance on recipes passed down through generations, emphasizing the importance of continuity and tradition within family-owned businesses.

This pattern reflects the informal, owner-driven decision-making process described by Fuzi (2021) and reinforces Jalis et al. (2020), who observed that SME restaurateurs rely more on personal experience and cultural norms than formal menu engineering techniques. However, the differences among ethnic groups also suggest that cultural identity acts as both a guiding principle and a constraint. For example, Malay and Chinese restaurateurs were less likely to alter core dishes, even in response to declining sales, whereas Indian counterparts were more willing to experiment.

Malay Restaurant Operator 4:

“The cuisine in Tanjong Karang leans heavily towards Javanese influences, so we focus more on the local food here, catering to the tastes of the people in this area.”

Chinese Restaurant Operator 8:

“Back then, he learned the recipe. It originally came from the Hainan region of China. It started way back in the 1940s, and since then, it has been passed down through the generations.”

Chinese Restaurant Operator 10:

“I love eating Bak Kut Teh.”

“So, I started by doing everything, from washing, frying, and all the preparations. I needed to learn everything.”

Indian Restaurant Operator 11:

“I studied how food is prepared in South India since our menu is based on South Indian cuisine.”

From a theoretical perspective, these results support the view that menu planning in SMEs is not purely a commercial exercise but a form of cultural negotiation (Bessière, 1998). Practically, they suggest that targeted training in cost control and menu optimisation could help restaurateurs adapt without compromising cultural authenticity.

4.2 Cultural Identity in Menu Decisions

Cultural identity emerged as a central driver in menu selection, presentation, and adaptation. Across all three groups, dishes were seen not merely as commodities but as cultural symbols. For instance, Malay restaurateurs frequently linked menu items to regional origin stories, Chinese owners to notions of heritage and authenticity, and Indian owners to ritual or celebratory contexts.

Malay Restaurant Operator 3:

“Secondly, this is a village area, and about 6 to 10 years ago, it was easier to source items like ikan sungai and landak.”

Indian Restaurant Operator 5:

“Yes, food. Specifically, banana leaf meals, Indian style.”

Chinese Restaurant Operator 8:

“It’s a heritage food. Our menu reflects the old, nice, significant authentic taste that has been around since our time in Seremban.”

Indian Restaurant Operator 13:

“I serve directly on banana leaves, without plates. It’s natural and reminiscent of the way they serve food in India.”

These findings echo Abidin et al. (2020) and Jalis et al. (2024), who stress the symbolic and narrative value of local food in destination branding. Yet, the study also revealed tensions. While restaurateurs acknowledged the commercial benefits of adapting dishes for broader appeal, they often viewed such changes as cultural dilution. This mirrors Khoirunnisa et al. (2022), who note that heritage preservation can sometimes limit market reach.

The implication is that future SME strategies should embrace a “dual menu” approach, maintaining core heritage dishes for authenticity while offering adapted versions for wider market appeal, as recommended by Sukur et al. (2024).

4.3 Innovation and Market Responsiveness

Innovation was most evident among Chinese restaurateurs, who frequently trialled new dishes inspired by regional or fusion cuisines. Malay restaurateurs tended to innovate through presentation and plating, while Indian owners experimented with ingredient substitutions to maintain affordability without altering the essence of traditional dishes. For example, as mentioned by:

Malay Restaurant Operator 2:

“But over time, many mentarang started breaking. They’re fragile, not like clams that you can stir around. They crumble easily, even with a slight touch. “So, we took the broken ones, removed the meat, and made fried fritters.”

Indian Restaurant Operator 5:

“For instance, when we serve fish, we enhance the presentation by adding onions and curry leaves for visual appeal and aroma.”

Indian Restaurant Operator 6:

“The spices from there are more authentic. We don’t want anything that’s low quality or mixed with other ingredients.”

Chinese Restaurant Operator 10:

“For our Bak Kut Teh, we make a clear broth instead of the dark soy sauce-based one that you typically see.”

Indian Restaurant Operator 13:

“For the vegetables, I focus on green leafy vegetables instead of basics like carrots or cucumbers. For instance, I use mustard greens, spinach, and traditional Indian greens like moringa leaves.”

Digital tools played a modest role in these innovations, with some owners using social media to gauge customer interest before introducing new items. This reflects Jalis et al. (2021), who highlighted the untapped potential of digital engagement in promoting local cuisine. However, the absence of a structured link between digital insights and menu planning suggests a missed opportunity for data-driven innovation (Putra et al., 2024).

Theoretically, this finding reinforces the role of market orientation (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990) in SME competitiveness. Practically, it suggests that equipping restaurateurs with basic digital analytics skills could enhance responsiveness and profitability.

4.4 Tripartite Comparison and Strategic Implications

The tripartite analysis revealed both shared and unique challenges. All groups valued heritage preservation, but the degree of menu adaptation varied significantly. Operational constraints such as supply chain disruptions and labour shortages were universal, yet responses differed: Chinese restaurateurs adjusted menus more readily, while Malay and Indian counterparts focused on maintaining traditional offerings despite rising costs.

Malay Restaurant Operator 4:

“But, we stopped selling it due to staffing issues.”

Chinese Restaurant Operator 9:

“Before you think about profit, you need to ensure your food is good, and your service is excellent. If your food isn’t good, what’s the point? If your food isn’t up to standard, there’s no use in hiring influencers to promote it, as the food quality isn’t maintained. There’s no point in that.”

Chinese Restaurant Operator 11:

“However, after the MCO, we had to adjust and introduced more affordable options, like bihun, to cater to the changing economic situation.”

This diversity underscores the importance of culturally sensitive SME development programmes. As Sukur et al. (2024) and Osman et al. (2021) suggest, a one-size-fits-all approach to culinary tourism promotion risks overlooking the nuanced realities of ethnic-based SMEs. Strategically, tourism bodies and SME support agencies should consider ethnicity-specific capacity-building initiatives to ensure both cultural preservation and market viability.

Based on the study findings, from a theoretical standpoint, this study extends SME and menu planning literature by demonstrating how cultural identity operates as a strategic variable, influencing both the content and adaptability of menus. It supports the view that heritage cuisine is not static but negotiated through ongoing interaction with market forces (Bessière, 1998; Jalis et al., 2020).

To synthesise the key findings across menu planning practices, cultural identity, and innovation strategies, Table 1 provides a comparative overview of SME restaurateurs in Malaysia.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of menu planning practices among SME restaurateurs in Malaysia

Theme	Malay Restaurateurs	Chinese Restaurateurs	Indian Restaurateurs
Menu planning practices among SME restaurateurs	Menus designed based on local taste preferences and community expectations	Strong personal involvement; emphasis on skills and recipes inherited through generations	Menu planning rooted in South Indian heritage and cultural preservation
Cultural identity in menu decisions	Strong linkage to regional origins and locally sourced ingredients	Emphasis on authenticity, heritage, and historical continuity	Food tied to rituals, traditions, and cultural serving styles (e.g., banana leaf)
Innovation and market responsiveness	Innovation through presentation and plating improvements	Most innovative; experimentation with new dishes and fusion ideas	Innovation through ingredient substitution to maintain cost without losing authenticity

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the menu planning practices of Malay, Chinese, and Indian SME restaurant owners in Malaysia, revealing how cultural identity, operational realities, and market responsiveness intersect to shape decision-making. Across the three groups, heritage preservation emerged as a shared priority, but the degree of adaptation varied, from cautious adjustments among Malay and Indian restaurateurs to more frequent innovation among Chinese counterparts. These variations underscore the importance of understanding menu planning not merely as a business function, but as a form of cultural negotiation embedded in Malaysia's multiethnic context.

The findings extend the literature on SME restaurant management by demonstrating that cultural identity operates as both a strategic asset and a constraint. They also highlight gaps in current SME support systems, which often adopt a uniform approach that fails to account for ethnic-specific business logics.

From a practical perspective, the study suggests that SMEs can benefit from a dual strategy, safeguarding core heritage dishes while introducing adapted offerings to broaden market reach. The integration of digital tools, as highlighted by Jalis et al. (2021), offers further opportunities for low-cost innovation and consumer engagement.

By providing a tripartite perspective, this research addresses the scarcity of comparative studies on menu planning across Malaysia's major ethnic groups. It contributes to both theory and practice by framing SME restaurant operations as a space where cultural preservation and commercial sustainability can coexist, provided there is targeted support, capacity building, and market-driven innovation. Future research could explore longitudinal changes in menu strategies, especially as global food trends and technological adoption continue to reshape the SME F&B landscape.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study adopts a qualitative approach with a relatively small sample size, which may constrain the generalisability of the findings to the broader SME foodservice sector in Malaysia. Future studies could adopt a mixed-methods approach by integrating quantitative data to enhance generalisability and enable comparative statistical analysis across a larger sample of SME restaurants.

Second, the study is geographically bounded, with data drawn from a specific location, which may not fully reflect variations in menu planning practices across other Malaysian states with distinct demographic and economic characteristics. Cultural interpretations and business strategies may vary significantly between urban and rural contexts. Future research should therefore expand the scope to include multiple regions in Malaysia to provide a more comprehensive understanding of contextual variations in menu planning practices.

5.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the competitiveness and sustainability of SME restaurants offering local Malaysian cuisine:

(i) *Adopt a Dual Menu Strategy*

Maintain a core set of heritage dishes to preserve cultural identity, while introducing adapted or innovative offerings to cater to changing consumer preferences. This approach can expand market reach without compromising authenticity.

(ii) *Leverage Digital Tools for Market Insights*

Utilise social media analytics, online feedback platforms, and targeted digital marketing campaigns to test new menu ideas, track consumer responses, and adjust offerings accordingly (Jalis, 2021).

(iii) *Provide Ethnicity-Sensitive SME Support*

Government agencies, tourism boards, and SME development programmes should design training and funding schemes that recognise the unique menu planning practices of Malay, Chinese, and Indian restaurateurs.

(iv) *Strengthen Cultural Storytelling in Marketing*

Embed cultural narratives in menu descriptions, promotional campaigns, and customer engagement activities to enhance the perceived value of dishes and differentiate from generic F&B competitors (Jalis et al., 2024).

(v) *Encourage Collaborative Supply Chains*

Foster partnerships among SME restaurateurs, local farmers, and artisanal producers to ensure consistent ingredient quality, reduce costs, and support local economic ecosystems.

Implementing these recommendations can help SME restaurants balance cultural preservation with commercial viability, contributing both to business resilience and Malaysia's broader culinary tourism agenda.

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7. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

8. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Arina Aqilah Sukur: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation and writing-original draft; **Mohd Hairi Jalis** Conceptualisation, supervision, writing, reviewing and editing the manuscript, and validation; **Norzuwana Sumarjan:** Conceptualisation, supervision, writing- review and editing, and validation.

9. DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT (Plus) to support grammatical accuracy and enhance sentence clarity. All generated content was subsequently reviewed, refined, and validated by the author(s), who take full responsibility for the final version of the publication.

10. DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality and ethical considerations involving the participants. However, they are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

11. ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). The ethics application was submitted online to the Secretariat of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) prior to the commencement of the study. All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with institutional ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity of respondents were strictly maintained throughout the study.

12. ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Arina Aqilah Sukur is a lecturer at Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology (TAR UMT). She is currently pursuing her PhD at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Selangor. Her research interests include hospitality management and culinary studies. She can be contacted via email at arinaaqilah@tarc.edu.my.

Mohd Hairi Jalis, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Hotel and Tourism Management at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Permatang Pau. His primary research areas are within economics, business, and management, with a specialization in tourism and hospitality. He has an active publication record in indexed journals, focusing on culinary heritage, tourism behaviour, hospitality education, and food service management. He can be contacted via email at mohdhairijalis@uitm.edu.my.

Norzuwana Sumarjan, PhD, is the Dean of the Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Puncak Alam, Selangor. Her field of expertise lies within economics, business, and management, with a specialization in tourism and hospitality. She is affiliated with the Research Nexus UiTM (ReNeU) under the Social, Creativity and Innovation (SCI) cluster, with a specific focus on hospitality management. She has an active publication record in indexed journals, covering areas such as tourism, hospitality education, consumer behaviour, and service management. She can be contacted via email at norzu161@uitm.edu.my.

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