

MALAYSIAN GASTRONOMY ROUTES AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

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ABSTRACT

Globally, food and tourism are increasingly being combined and the development of gastronomy as a tourism product has become a trend recently. The awareness of the importance of food as a heritage component in tourism has been steadily growing. As competition between tourism destinations in the Asia region increases, Malaysian local food and culture are a valuable source to attract tourists. Malaysian gastronomy has a significant identity, and an important role to play since food is closely related to tourist consumption and experience. The tourists' quest for authentic tastes and experiences has been a fundamental thrust, and in practice tourism destinations strive to develop their own distinctive and unique identities. This emergent trend can be examined as most of the tourist destinations have made a great effort to promote their local cuisines. In line with this, the Malaysian gastronomy route should be in tandem with the cultural activity highlighted.

Keywords: gastronomy, tourist, destination and Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The World Tourism Organization forecasts that international arrivals worldwide are expected to reach 1.0 billion by 2010. Of this, 791 million or about 80 percent are envisaged to be intra-regional tourists, with the rest being long-haul travellers. The East Asia and Pacific regions are expected to receive 200 million travellers. In spite of the rising competition from other tourist-seeking economies, Malaysia's tourism sector is expected to benefit considerably from the growth of international travel during the Ninth Plan period. Tourist arrivals in Malaysia are poised to grow at an average rate of 8.4 per cent per annum and estimated to reach 24.6 million by 2010 (Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010). Accordingly, the strategy will focus on fully realizing the tourism potential as an important source of growth, and efforts will be intensified towards strengthening Malaysia's position as a preferred global tourist destination.

Tourism Malaysia has designed activities to stimulate the Malaysian tourism and tourism-related industries, and ultimately the aim is to increase the number of

foreign tourists to Malaysia, extend the average length of their stay and, in doing so, increase Malaysia's tourism revenue. This is to help promote new investments in the country while providing increased employment opportunities. It can be seen that the growth of Malaysian tourism will contribute positively to economic development and enhance the quality of life for all Malaysians. In 2005, the tourist expenditure pattern indicated accommodation as the highest component, comprising 33.1 per cent, followed by shopping at 24.0 per cent and up to 17.4 per cent is accounted for by foods and beverages (Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010). These figures are expected to be higher today. In reality, food has become an increasingly important element in the tourism industry. However, there has been insufficient consideration of the tourist food experience.

In recent years, a growing emphasis has been placed on tourism experiences and attractions related to food. In promoting tourism products and services to the world, what are the segments that Tourism Malaysia emphasizes the most? Sports-tourism, ecotourism, culture or gastronomy tourism? The Visit Malaysia Year 2007 was more events-driven, while for the year 2008 the Visit Malaysia campaign adopted a destination-focused approach that identified selected destinations in Malaysia and carried out intensive promotions of these destinations and niche tourism. The niche products that are being highly promoted are eco-tourism, heritage tourism, sports and recreational tourism, cultural tourism, homestay programs, medical and health tourism, fashion and lifestyle, filming, education tourism, "Malaysia My Second Home, agro-tourism and marine tourism ((Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010).

The evolution of Malaysia into a cultural melting pot is evident in the extremely diverse racial groups contributing to the great Malaysia gastronomic heritage. Apparently gastronomical tourism which is usually considered as a supporting niche product will now showcase Malaysia's food and be known as "Malaysia Truly a Kitchen".

Significance of food in a tourist destination

In previous literature, tourism is often linked to the category of the visual, sightseeing or the gaze (MacCannell, 1976; Urry, 1990) and such a deficiency has recently been well recognized by a number of academics. In order to balance the visual bias, Urry (2002) claims that tourism should involve various sensescapes, such as soundscapes, smellscapes, tastescapes, the geography of touch, in addition to landscapes. Dann and Jacobsen (2002) have also examined tourists' quest for smellscapes, and a few researchers have related tourism to gastronomy and discussed how the search for tastescapes becomes a motivation of tourists (Hjalager and Richards, 2002a).

Food has been found to be an attribute whereby tourists perceive the attractiveness of a destination for a reason other than climate, accommodation and captivating scenery, thus, it is a fundamental element of the tourist product. Food related tourism can allow tourists to achieve the desired goals of relaxation,

excitement, escapism, status, education and lifestyle (Frochot, 2003). Food and beverage as destination products can either act as a primary or secondary motivators (Quan and Wang, 2004) that add value to the image of a destination (Boniface, 2003; Boyne, Hall and Williams, 2003; du Rand Health and Alberts, 2003; Long 2004). It is important not to confuse food tourism and the consumption of food during travel. Tourist choices are not determined by a trivial need to 'feed oneself', but also by the desire to eat interesting products in suitable environments (Finkelstein, 1989; Pillsbury, 1990). Hall and Mitchell (2000) define food tourism as visiting food exhibitions, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food tasting and experiencing food are the primary factors for travel. Similar definitions of food tourism include culinary, gourmet and gastronomic tourism (Boniface, 2003; Hall and Sharples, 2003; Long, 2004). This distinction between food tourism and food as part of the travel experience is evident in research that has classified tourists based on the importance of food in the overall trip. More and more people are travelling for reasons of gastronomy (Bessiere, 1998; Hall and Sharples, 2003; Long, 2004), and as a result, food tourism, in its broadest sense has gained a higher profile as a pull factor in destination marketing (Boniface, 2003; Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Hall and Sharples, 2003; Hjalager and Richards, 2002).

Meanwhile in the literature on tourist destinations, the importance of foods has been recognized. Food has been regarded as not only being a basic necessity for tourist consumption but also an essential element of regional culture (Jones and Jenkins, 2002). Since food has been proven to be an important means of selling the identity and culture of destination, food consumption is regarded as an important factor in marketing the destination. Food consumption also enables food producers to add value to their products by creating a tourist experience around raw materials (Hjalager and Richards, 2002a). Studies have also shown that the success of a tourist destination is closely linked to its gastronomic identity (Belisle, 1983; Sheldon and Fox, 1988; Reynolds, 1993; Faulkner et al., 1999; Sparks et al., 2000; Hall et al., 2003; Ramos et al., 2004). The overall food service experience is an increasingly important factor of both tourist satisfaction and dissatisfaction, as it can greatly stimulate expenditure and also cause serious financial losses (Nield et al., 2000). Hence, researchers are paying growing attention to the hospitality industry's efforts to satisfy the desires of culinary tourists (Fontane, 2000; Sparks et al., 2003), who expect top quality service, an emphasis on local specialities and fresh ingredients (Brumback, 1999) are crucial.

In more recent research on the importance of food in tourism, many researchers have emphasized the reason food is becoming an essential part of a destination's identity and a tourist attraction in its own right, rather than serving as one of the many destination's features (Hjalager and Richards, 2002b; Boniface, 2003; Long, 2003). Accordingly, research focus is on the tourist for whom the gastronomic experience represents a key motive for her

or his choice of a destination. Typical gastronomic tourists are essentially the same as those on cultural holidays: above-average-income professional couples in their 30–50s (Gastronomic Tourism ..., 2004; Huang et al., 1996). In a research by Huang et al. (1996) on the influence of national character upon the response to unsatisfactory hotel service, respondents made local cuisine a centre of their quest for knowledge and experience. In a survey by Gyimothy et al. (2000), respondents indicated restaurants to be a significant or decisive reason for their choice of a destination. Sparks et al. (2003) indicated that respondents stated restaurants to be an important factor, and almost an extremely important factor, when selecting a destination. Moreover, respondents in Sparks et al.'s (2003) survey emphasized the importance of consuming healthy food while on holiday, and stated the opportunity of trying “new, exciting and different foods” and the opportunity “to spoil oneself” as key reasons for eating out. Interestingly, between 60 and 90 percent of those respondents who claimed that the quality of food outlets did not influence their initial decision to visit a destination reported that their gastronomic experience would induce them to return to that destination.

Ideal gastronomy routes

Malaysia as a multiracial and diverse country from a tourism point of view, celebrates many traditional and cultural activities that portray a multi-cultural ethnicity. Historically traditional Malaysian cuisine has been greatly influenced by traders from the neighbouring countries such as Indonesia, India, the Middle East, China and others. Thus, in offering visitors many different experiences, indeed the local cuisines should become apparent, obvious and visible as a destination's intangible heritage; as experiencing the delectable taste allows tourists to gain an authentic cultural experience. In this regard, the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010) has planned for innovative food trails based on the distinct specialties of states, regions and communities to attract tourist to savour local delicacies.

Given the strong relationship between food and identity, it is not surprising that food becomes an important place marker in tourism promotion. Trying new and tantalizing food is considered an enjoyable activity for tourists and most tourists wish to experience non-threatening, exotic experiences. Boyne et al. (2003) identified a continuum of food tourists ranging from the most committed where food is an important reason for holiday travelling, to actively searching for information on the gastronomic heritage and availability of food in the area to tourists who have no interest in foods. Therefore, one available technique to create an image of “safe exoticism” is to highlight unique tangible and intangible products and services, with local cuisines as one such potential point of differentiation (Boyne et al., 2003). One of the basic reasons for this is the strong relationship between certain localities and certain types of food.

A Hughes (1995) pointed out there is a “notion of a natural relationship between a region's land, its climatic conditions and the character of food it

produces. It is this geographical diversity which provides for the regional distinctiveness in culinary traditions and the evolution of a characteristic heritage". This link between location and gastronomy has been used in a number of ways in tourism, including promotional efforts based on distinctive or 'typical' regional or national foods. In his classification of cultural attractions, Munsters (1994) identifies regional gastronomic routes as a specific cultural tourism product such as an asparagus route, a mussel route and others. Many of these routes are seasonal, reflecting the link between agricultural cycles and local food production. The idea behind such routes is that specific products can be linked to particular locations and/or seasons.

Food is a means for guiding tourists around Malaysia. In Malaysia there are strong linkages between the local food and tourism, as these two sectors have a mutually beneficial relationship. The promotion of remarkable local food may represent the identity of a community; strengthen the local image and regional identity, thereby helping to promote local culture and heritage. "Malaysia Kitchen" is hoping to introduce Malaysian cuisine to the world, reflecting a mix of Malay, Chinese and Indian cooking, then to spawn side industries like the production of spices for the dishes.

Since Malaysian food is not one particular kind of food but a unique culinary spectrum originating from Malaysia's multi-ethnic population that has blended together sampling tastes, ingredients and cooking methods from one another, the gastronomic routes in the country could be promoted robustly into local delicacies, agricultural and farming. Among others, the states of Melaka, Perak, Penang, Sarawak and Sabah could be highlighted as "the states for gastronomy routes".

Melaka should be known as the home of fusion Indonesian influence Nyonya food, and that of the Portuguese and Eurasians with their delightful combination of east-west cooking, since much of it is served in quaint cafes in historical shop-houses. The gastronomic route for Siamese influence Nyonya food and Indian Muslims's Nasi Kandar, would best be represented by Penang. This popular northern Malaysian dish comes from a time when rice (nasi) hawkers or vendors would balance a pole (kandar) on their shoulders with two huge containers of rice meals. The name has remained and today the word Nasi Kandar is seen on most Indian Muslim or "Malaysian Mamak" restaurants and stalls.

The exotic "king of fruits" durian, which has the unusual flavor and odor that have prompted many people to express diverse and passionate views ranging from deep appreciation to intense disgust is abundant in many states. The durian which has been known and consumed in southeastern Asia since prehistoric times, but has only been known to the western world for about 600 years, can be linked to the local delicacy known as "tempoyak"; fermented durian flesh which is eaten as a condiment or cooked as a gravy for many types of fresh water fish. The prominent "tempoyak dish" variations are found in the states of Perak, Pahang and Negri Sembilan. Thus, "the tempoyak route" should be emphasized. The State of Perak is also famous for guava (a native fruit of tropical America) which is known for

its musky aroma and soft, delicious pulp and pomelo (*Citrus grandis*), the largest of citrus fruits, belongs to the family Rutaceae which features significantly in the Chinese New Year celebrations.

The east coast regions such as Kelantan and Trengganu are not only the cradle of Malay culture and the exotic Malay food which is rich in flavor and colour, but also the route for famous “keropok, keropok leko and keropok gote” (variation of fish crackers); fresh or dried. For centuries, the originality of the taste made by the ancestors has not changed.

Sarawak being Malaysia’s largest state, covers an area of 124,450 square kilometres, situated on the northwestern coast of Borneo is a famous black peppercorn and pearl sago route. The black peppercorn grown here is a highest quality fruit product that is dried indoors with a continuous flow of hot air, and delivered to its destination in just 24 hours after picking, thus retaining its wonderful aromatic qualities.

On the other hand, food and culture are clearly seen in sago processing. The starch extracted from the pithy centre of the sago palm tree plays an extremely important role in the life of Melanau (native tribe), as there is a special dance dedicated to it. The entire process of processing sago flours is depicted in the movements of this dance called ‘Tari Mengarang’ - from the stage when the felled sago palm trunk is sawn and scrapped, and then trampled for its flour content to the final step when it is made into edible sago pearls.

Sabah which is also known by the famed name “The Land below the Wind” is a well-known route for tiger prawns which are cultivated in brackish water ponds. Being the largest tiger prawn producer, spawners from Tawau are graded the best in Malaysia. For decades, Tawau has been exporting high-grade tiger prawns to neighboring countries such as Singapore, Japan and Hong Kong.

Gastronomy products are more likely to be mentioned by repeat visitors than by first-time tourists. Focusing on the food experience is a useful way of tracing the relationship between tourism and gastronomy, as both forms of consumption are increasingly important in creating images of gastronomic destinations. Such basic gastronomy routes above can satisfy tourists’ experience, as they explore new cuisines and food that they are not likely to encounter at home. The adventurous tourists are likely to seek out the traditional foods, very often not available in the upscale restaurants and hotels, or even if they are available, the authentic taste has changed to accommodate the tastes of many.

CONCLUSION

The fusion of cuisines that has sprouted from the multicultural affair of combining Malays, Indians, Chinese and Peranakan and others, developed over the centuries has made Malaysian food eclectic and scrumptious with its own colour and palate. As more people travel to sample the ‘local’ culture and atmosphere, we

have to accept that gastronomy has become an increasingly important means of emphasizing the local identity. Since each state in Malaysia is known to have something different to offer in terms of culinary and agricultural delights, such gastronomic routes should be emphasized, and integrated into the intangible culture of different tourist destinations in Malaysia, and be affirmed as part of the national heritage in order to preserve food authenticity.

It is undeniable that food can at least provide a more superb and enjoyable holiday atmosphere than tourists expected. Thus, with such an exciting diversity of food, Malaysia should be upheld as a remarkable destination to enjoy the “art of eating”. Hence, Malaysian gastronomy should be considered unequivocally or wholly when promoting local destinations.

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