

# Strategic Models for Enhancing Cultural Gastronomic Tourism in Thailand

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## Abstract

Cultural gastronomic tourism has emerged as a key strategy to promote Thailand's culinary heritage, support local communities, and enhance sustainable tourism development. This study aims to develop comprehensive models for cultural gastronomic tourism by integrating local food identity, community participation, tourist experiential engagement, and sustainable practices. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative data from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with community members, tourism operators, and policy stakeholders, and quantitative data from 420 tourists visiting gastronomic tourism sites across Thailand. Qualitative findings highlighted the importance of community involvement, heritage-based culinary experiences, and participatory approaches for sustainable and authentic tourism. Quantitative analysis, using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), confirmed that local food identity, community participation, and sustainability practices significantly influence tourists' experiential engagement and intention to revisit. Based on the integration of these findings were developed and validated with experts. These models provide practical guidelines for policymakers, tourism planners, and local communities to design effective, culturally authentic, and sustainable gastronomic tourism initiatives in Thailand.

**Keywords:** Cultural Gastronomic Tourism, Local Food Identity, Community Participation, Sustainable practices

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Principles and Rationale

Gastronomic tourism has emerged as a key segment within the tourism industry, providing travelers with immersive experiences that combine culinary exploration with cultural discovery (Sims, 2009). In Thailand, the diversity of local cuisines, regional ingredients, and traditional preparation techniques offers a unique opportunity to develop cultural gastronomic tourism that is both authentic and engaging. Thai food is not merely a product for consumption but a reflection of the country's heritage, social customs, and regional identity, making it a powerful tool for promoting cultural understanding and tourism development (Kivela & Crotts, 2006).

Recent trends indicate that tourists increasingly seek experiential travel, where the consumption of local cuisine is intertwined with learning about local traditions, rituals, and food production methods (Roiampaeng et al., 2023; Chutimant, 2024). Such trends highlight

the potential of cultural gastronomy as a platform for sustainable tourism, supporting local communities, preserving culinary heritage, and generating economic benefits.

Despite the richness of Thai culinary culture, research suggests that there is a lack of systematic models for developing cultural gastronomic tourism that integrate local identity, tourist experience, and sustainable community development (Tansakul, 2020). Developing clear frameworks or models is essential for policymakers, tourism planners, and entrepreneurs to effectively design, manage, and promote gastronomic experiences that are culturally meaningful, economically viable, and socially sustainable (Mongkolrojsakul et al., 2025; Suwunniponth, 2025).

Therefore, this study aims to explore and propose models for developing cultural gastronomic tourism in Thailand, focusing on integrating local food culture, tourist experience, and community participation. By examining current practices, tourist perspectives, and successful case studies, the research seeks to provide practical guidelines for the sustainable development of Thailand's gastronomic tourism sector.

## **1.2 Research Objective**

The research will address the following specific objectives:

1. To identify the key components and factors of cultural gastronomic tourism in Thailand, including local food culture, regional culinary practices, and community participation.
2. To examine tourists' perceptions, preferences, and experiences regarding cultural gastronomic tourism in Thailand.
3. To develop practical models for promoting and managing cultural gastronomic tourism, integrating local culture, tourist experience, and sustainable community development.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Gastronomic Tourism and Local Food Identity in Thailand**

Gastronomic tourism is deeply connected with cultural identity, as food reflects a community's history, traditions, and social practices. Gastronomic tourism is increasingly recognized as a niche tourism sector that connects food, culture, and local identity. Globally, studies highlight that culinary heritage contributes significantly to destination differentiation, sustainability, and cultural preservation (Sánchez-Cañizares et al., 2019; Nistor & Dezsi, 2022).

In Thailand, gastronomic tourism also reflects local cultural identity. Naijarun and Meekruaiam (2022) examined the Ban Wanghad community in Sukhothai, demonstrating how seasonal and locally sourced ingredients (e.g., wild mushrooms, young mango leaves, native vegetables) form part of a gastronomic tourism route that combines storytelling, tasting, and participatory experiences. Similarly, Tansakul (2020) highlighted the Khanab Nak community's traditional use of nipa palm sugar and local cooking techniques as unique gastronomic assets, proposing a model integrating conservation, creative economy, and community participation. These

findings align with global evidence that gastronomic heritage strengthens destination identity while fostering sustainable tourism.

## **2.2 Participatory Models and Community-Based Development**

A participatory approach to gastronomic tourism can effectively integrate local communities into tourism planning and management. The research indicates that innovation, creativity, and co-creation are central to enhancing gastronomic tourism experiences (Robinson & Getz, 2014). These approaches emphasize participatory design where tourists actively engage in food experiences, contributing to satisfaction and perceived authenticity (González et al., 2023).

In Thailand, participatory models have been explored in Pong Tham village (Kalaya, 2023), where community workshops, traditional dinners (Khantoke), and herb-based activities encourage co-created experiences. Mongkolrojsakul et al. (2025) proposed a four-type model of gastronomic tourism products—Ingredient Journey, Local Menu Food Sensory, Culinary Co-creation, and Gastroconnect—aligning with international best practices for designing meaningful and culturally rich food tourism experiences.

## **2.3 Cultural Capital and Cultural Gastronomy in Heritage Destinations**

Gastronomic tourism in heritage destinations allows the integration of history, culture, and local cuisine. Culinary experiences can enhance tourists' perception of heritage sites and contribute to sustainable local development (Santini et al., 2022). Cultural capital theory has been used to frame gastronomic tourism development. In Sukhothai, Naijarun & Meekrua-iam (2022) developed a "gastronomy tourism route" that leverages the community's cultural food assets seasonal ingredients, heritage cooking techniques, and local storytelling to create a tourism circuit that is immersive and participatory.

Gastronomy tourism in heritage destinations offers a special opportunity to combine history, food, and place. Intasueb and Boonkoun (2023) studied Sukhothai, a UNESCO heritage area, and found that local recipes and community food identity (including traditional cooking methods) provide strong potential for gastronomic tourism. They recommended building tourism models that educate tourists on local food heritage, integrate local production, and enhance destination authenticity through storytelling and local participation.

## **2.4 Strategy and Policy Approaches for Gastronomy Tourism**

Understanding tourist demand and motivations is critical for designing effective gastronomic tourism strategies. The research identifies multiple tourist typologies: (1) specialists seeking diverse gastronomic experiences, (2) learners interested in production sites or cooking, and (3) casual tourists seeking accessible food experiences (López-Guzmán et al., 2022). Studies in Colombia found that tourist motivation influences satisfaction through gastronomic experiences, serving as a key mediator between intention and overall tourism satisfaction (García & Carvajal, 2019).

Strategic models for gastronomy tourism also require top-down support. Chunkajorn and Na Thalang (2022) studied the “Thailand Riviera” region and proposed a four-pronged strategy for gastronomy tourism development: aggressive infrastructure strategy, defensive service development, turnaround strategy emphasizing local food tradition, and retrenchment with community food distribution and local food event marketing. This strategic framework shows how cultural gastronomy can be embedded in larger tourism development plans.

### 3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to develop comprehensive models for cultural gastronomic tourism in Thailand. The qualitative approach explores in-depth insights from key stakeholders such as local communities, tourism operators, and policy planners, while the quantitative approach examines tourists’ perceptions, preferences, and experiences to validate and refine the proposed models.

#### 3.1 Population and Sample

*Qualitative approach:* Target participants include community leaders, local restaurateurs, tourism officers, and cultural experts in selected Thai regions known for gastronomic tourism (e.g., Sukhothai, Chiang Mai, Nakhon Si Thammarat). Purposive sampling is used to select 20–30 key informants who are actively involved in cultural and gastronomic tourism.

*Quantitative approach:* The target population is domestic and international tourists visiting Thai cultural gastronomy sites. Stratified random sampling ensures representation across age, gender, nationality, and type of tourism. Sample size follows Cochran’s formula (1977), with a minimum of 400 respondents to ensure statistical reliability.

#### 3.2 Data Collection Methods

*Qualitative Data:* In-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders using semi-structured questionnaires to gather detailed insights on tourism practices and development opportunities. Additionally, focus group discussions with community members and tourism operators were organized to explore local food practices, tourist experiences, and potential models for gastronomic tourism.

*Quantitative Data:* Questionnaires distributed to tourists, measuring perceptions of cultural authenticity, gastronomy experience quality, satisfaction, and intention to participate in culinary activities. The questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) and is pre-tested for reliability (Cronbach’s alpha  $\geq 0.7$ ) (Hair et al., 2020).

#### 3.3 Data Analysis

*Qualitative Analysis:* Document analysis of existing policies, festival records, and tourism development reports was also conducted to contextualize the findings and provide a foundation for model development

*Quantitative Analysis:* Data were analyzed using Descriptive statistics to summarize tourist perceptions, preferences, and experiences. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is used to examine relationships among variables and refine the proposed tourism development models.

Based on the integration of qualitative insights and quantitative validation, the study develops conceptual models of cultural gastronomic tourism in Thailand. The models are presented in diagrams and tables, illustrating the relationships between local food identity, community participation, tourist experience, and sustainable development.

## 4. Results

A total of 420 tourists participated in the quantitative survey. Of these respondents, 56% were female and 44% were male, with ages ranging from 18 to over 51 years: 22% were aged 18-25, 34% were 26-35, 28% were 36-50, and 16% were 51 and above. Regarding nationality, 68% were Thai and 32% were international tourists. In terms of visitation frequency, 45% were first-time visitors, while 55% were repeat visitors to gastronomic tourism sites. This demographic distribution provided a diverse representation of tourist perspectives, ensuring that the findings reflect a broad range of experiences and preferences in cultural gastronomic tourism in Thailand.

### 4.1 Quantitative Findings: Tourists' Perceptions

The survey results indicate that tourists show high levels of interest in cultural gastronomic experiences in Thailand. Among the measured aspects, authentic local cuisine experiences received the highest rating (Mean = 4.56, SD = 0.48), followed by participatory culinary activities (Mean = 4.42, SD = 0.52), learning about the cultural and historical significance of food (Mean = 4.39, SD = 0.51), and sustainable and eco-friendly food practices (Mean = 4.25, SD = 0.60).

### 4.2 Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Results

SEM analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among Local Food Identity, Community Participation, Sustainable Practices, and Tourist Experiential Engagement. The model fit indices were satisfactory:  $\chi^2/df = 2.15$ , CFI = 0.951, TLI = 0.944, RMSEA = 0.048, SRMR = 0.042.

**Table 1 SEM Results of Cultural Gastronomic Tourism Model**

Path	$\beta$	t	p	Effect Type
Local Food Identity → Tourist Experience	0.62	9.84	<.001	Direct
Community Participation → Tourist Experience	0.55	8.76	<.001	Direct
Sustainable Practices → Tourist Experience	0.48	7.35	<.001	Direct
Local Food Identity → Revisit Intention	0.36	6.12	<.001	Indirect

Community Participation → Revisit Intention	0.28	5.48	<.001	Indirect
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The direct effects show that Local Food Identity ( $\beta = 0.62$ ,  $t = 9.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Community Participation ( $\beta = 0.55$ ,  $t = 8.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and Sustainable Practices ( $\beta = 0.48$ ,  $t = 7.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ) significantly influenced Tourist Experiential Engagement. Indirect effects indicate that Local Food Identity and Community Participation enhance tourists' intention to revisit and recommend sites via improved experiential engagement ( $\beta = 0.36$  and  $0.28$ , respectively;  $p < .001$ ). These results confirm that local food identity, community participation, and sustainability practices are key drivers of effective cultural gastronomic tourism experiences.

### 4.3 Qualitative Findings: Stakeholder Insights

Thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups with 25 stakeholders (community leaders, restaurateurs, and tourism officers) identified the following key themes:

*Local Food Identity:* Emphasizing regional ingredients, traditional cooking methods, and heritage recipes as the core of cultural gastronomic tourism.

*Community Participation:* Community involvement in cooking demonstrations, food festivals, and storytelling strengthens authenticity and ensures sustainable tourism development.

*Tourist Experience:* Tourists value interactive and immersive experiences, such as culinary workshops, ingredient harvesting, and co-creation of dishes.

*Sustainability and Cultural Preservation:* Stakeholders emphasized aligning tourism models with environmental sustainability and protection of cultural heritage.

These themes form the basis for developing comprehensive models of cultural gastronomic tourism in Thailand.

### 4.4 Proposed Models of Cultural Gastronomic Tourism

Based on integrated qualitative and quantitative findings, a combined model incorporates all three aspects, linking local food identity, community participation, tourist experience, and sustainable practices into a coherent framework for policymakers, tourism planners, and entrepreneurs.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined the development of cultural gastronomic tourism in Thailand by integrating local food identity, community participation, tourist experiential engagement, and sustainability practices (Robinson & Getz, 2014; González et al., 2023; Santini et al., 2022). The findings demonstrate that authentic local cuisine and traditional culinary practices serve as the foundation of cultural gastronomic tourism, reflecting Thailand's diverse heritage and regional identity (Naijarun & Meekrua-iam, 2022).

The results also highlight the critical role of community involvement. Participatory approaches, such as cooking demonstrations, food festivals, and heritage storytelling, enhance tourist experiences and foster sustainable tourism development by empowering local residents and preserving cultural capital (Keawchaoon & Kongprame, 2024; Kalaya, 2023). Additionally, sustainable and eco-friendly practices, including environmentally responsible sourcing, waste reduction, and promotion of local ingredients, further strengthen the model and align tourism development with contemporary sustainability goals (Chunkajorn & Na Thalang, 2022).

Based on the integration of qualitative insights and quantitative analysis, three complementary models were proposed: Community-Centered Model, Experiential Engagement Model, and Sustainability-Oriented Model, which together form a holistic framework for developing cultural gastronomic tourism in Thailand. The SEM results confirm that local food identity, community participation, and sustainable practices significantly influence tourist experiential engagement, which in turn positively impacts tourists' intention to revisit and recommend gastronomic destinations (Tansakul, 2020; Mongkolrojsakul et al., 2025).

Overall, the study provides practical guidelines for policymakers, tourism planners, and local communities to design and implement effective gastronomic tourism initiatives that are culturally authentic, economically beneficial, and environmentally sustainable. Future research could expand the model to include cross-regional comparisons, digital gastronomic marketing strategies, and post-pandemic tourism adaptations to further enhance Thailand's position as a leading destination for cultural gastronomy.

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