



Review Article

**FOOD CULTURE: GASTRONOMIC EXPERIENCES IN SINGAPORE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Food and gastronomy are among widely recognized as important features of many tourism destinations due to their potential to attract visitors, improve destination image and stimulate the development of local businesses. Culinary experiences, specific food tourism itineraries and food heritage tourism have appeared in many destinations worldwide providing a more meaningful and memorable way to enjoy the local food scene. This paper explores variety of food culture, gastronomy and food traditions in Singapore. Drawing on qualitative data collected through participant observation and semi-structural interviews with gastronomic service providers, the study demonstrates how food tourism has become a part of the Singaporean culture that represents cultural identity of the destination but also provides a unique gastronomic experience. We argue that there is a huge potential to further promote food tourism and gastronomic experience in Singapore and more conceptual and empirical research is needed to study the potential of food as an ‘experience’ and how cultural values play a significant part for the development of gastronomic experiences.

**Keywords:** food; tourism; gastronomy; experience; Singapore

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Culture and heritage are widely considered as major components of the tourism industry not only from an economic perspective (Dümcke & Gnedovsky, 2013) but largely due to their appeal to provide more memorable and meaningful tourist experiences (Selby, 2004; Park, 2014; Naumov, 2015). According to Douglas, Douglas and Derrett (2001, p. 114), cultural tourism is a form of tourism that relates to various aspects of culture whether profiling culture, involving cultural experiences, learning about culture or participating in culture. The latter also refers to the experiential nature of culture and its role with the tourism industry – culture is manifested, celebrated and consumed by the tourists through interaction and engagement (Richards & Wilson, 2006).

Food is an essential part of the popular culture. For Everett and Aitchison (2008), Timothy and Ron (2013) and Medina and Tresserras (2018), food defines who we are and what we eat is a window to our culture, heritage and identity. As Bourdieu (1984) argues our eating habitats are largely influenced by various intangible heritage

elements and food is “one of the strongest ways” in which ethnic groups “articulate their memories” (Wong, 2007, p. 124). Gastronomic resources are also considered as tourist attractions and play an important role of creating value at destinations (Hall, Sharples, Mitchell, Macionis, & Cambourne, 2003; Everett, 2016). Food consumption in particular has become more than just a physiological need but it has been manufactured and widely recognized as an essential part of the tourism experience (Boniface, 2003; Hall & Sharples, 2008; Everett, 2009; Mak, Lumbers & Eves, 2012).

Studies on gastronomy, food heritage and food tourism have gained popularity over the last two decades as many scholars have become interested in how food related activities could enhance the tourism destination experiences (see for example, McKercher, Okumus & Okumus, 2008; Horng & Tsai, 2012;). The academic scholarship covers a wide spectrum of studies, including but not limited to ones in science, art, history, society, and other major fields such as nutritional values, agricultural importance, symbolic role, and culinary arts (see for example, Gillespie, 2002; Getz, Robinson, Andersson & Vujicic, 2014; Ellis, Park, Kim & Yeoman, 2018). Food tourism is a particularly important topic in Southeast Asia, a region with a great diversity of food traditions including some of the most celebrated cuisines worldwide such as Indian and Chinese. Within Southeast Asia, Singapore has recorded a significant tourism interest with its cosmopolitan and contemporary outlook but also remodeling and redeveloping its tourism attractions. As a multi-cultural destination, Singapore also offers wide range of culturally diverse food related products from around the world which satisfies every palate.

This paper investigates the background of Singapore’s gastronomic experiences and how it has become an inevitable tourism attraction in recent years. The research draws on qualitative data collected as a part of a larger project and includes participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The qualitative approach has been chosen due to the exploratory nature of this research and more specifically, our aim to consider and study different realities and perceptions to food heritage and food culture. As Silverman (2010) and Saunders et al. (2007) explain, qualitative research allows us to provide a more holistic and comprehensive analysis and gather rich and meaningful data which addresses the main aim of this paper. The data collection took place between 2015 and 2017 and includes participation observation conducted at food courts, food festivals and various food events and semi-structured interviews with gastronomic service providers (restaurant managers/supervisors). Looking at the historical perspectives of Singaporean food, the study demonstrates how food tourism has become a part of the Singaporean culture that represents cultural identity of the destination but also provides a unique gastronomic experience.

## **2. FOOD, CULTURE & TOURISM**

The relationship between food and culture can be traced back since the growth of human civilizations. The food supply was the most important factor in the evolution of humankind; however, eating is more than just vital for human survival as it is an activity by which culture can be understood (Chang, 1977). For Henderson (2009; 2014), food represents people, place and cultural diversity. Levi-Strauss (1966) relates food as an important cultural element while Harris and Ross (1987) put an emphasis on how human foodways have evolved over time. Douglas (1972) argues that food acts as a message system where codes can be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed.

Food is considered as a significant component of the popular culture in many developed destinations and provide an important part of contemporary lifestyles (Hall & Mitchell, 2005). Food is also regarded as a part of our daily lifestyle and food tourism has emerged as a special interest tourism which encompasses many niche areas such as culinary, gastronomic, gourmet tourism reflecting tourist interests in food as a form of serious leisure (Hall & Mitchell, 2001; Hall et al., 2003; Mitchell & Hall, 2003). Food is an integral component in developing the niche destinations and plays an important role in visitor satisfaction (Kivela & Crotts, 2006).

According to Bessière (1998), traditional food can attract tourists to a particular destination because consuming food is not just a form of entertainment but also a part of cultural consumption. Eating local foods could become an essential part of the travel and educational experience. Food has become more than a secondary

attraction for tourists but a significant factor in attracting tourists (Seo & Yun, 2015). Nam and Lee (2011) argue that the local food may serve as a primary motivation for a tourist to a country's culture an argument which has a merit for example, in the case of Japan which is largely considered as one of the leading food tourism destinations (see Murayama, 2012). Thus, local food may serve as a 'cultural ambassador' providing an initial exposure to the country's culture through food and people (Bailey & Tian 2002). Tourists not only purchase the food to overcome their hunger but also to expose themselves to a new culture through local food consumption. It is evident that food could be a major attraction to a destination if the destination promotes it affectively with a specific marketing plan (see for example, Che, 2006).

### 3.0 GASTRONOMIC TOURISM AND EXPERIENCES

Food, culinary or gastronomic tourism is considered as a relatively recent form of tourism that has become a significant segment of the tourism industry (Santich, 2004; Fox, 2007; Chuang, 2009; Ab Karim & Chi, 2010; Horng, Liu, Chou, & Tsai, 2012). All these terms refer to a form of travel that is exclusively motivated by an interest in learning about and experiencing the food (and drinks) at a particular destination. It can include the experience of everyday foods served by street vendors and local restaurants or elaborate tasting menus served at Michelin-star restaurants (Bjork & Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2014).

Gastronomy generally refers to the art of cooking and good eating. It could also refer to the properties (e.g. restaurants) that diversify the cuisines of a country to another or regions from each other by means of foods, eating habits, and food preparation techniques (Cömert & Özkaya, 2014). Therefore anyone, either a tourist or local who is involved in tasting, preparing, experiencing, experimenting, researching, discovering, understanding, and writing about it, is also involved in gastronomic tourism (Hall & Michell, 2005).

A unique blend of gastronomic delicacies could help in developing and promoting a tourism destination because tourists want to taste unique and authentic dishes when they travel (Seo & Yun, 2015). According to Henderson (2014), gastronomic tourism is a holistic experience in which tourist can be engaged in— agriculture, economic improvement, and development of local tourism by participating in the local cultural activities related to food.

Local foods brand places and many countries have developed culinary tourism which allows them to capitalize on their cuisines (Seo & Yun, 2015). Comparing with contemporary arts, Hegarty and Mahony (2001, p.12), define gastronomy through art and beauty which “translates into menu balance and harmony in such areas as colour, temperature, taste and texture; which in some cases can be dictated by the aesthetic demands of the raw materials used to create a gastronomic work.” It has been demonstrated that locally prepared distinctive food can be important as an attraction but also reshape the image of a particular destination (Hall et al., 2003; Cohen & Avieli, 2004;).

Gastronomy tourism adds in important value to the destination in the creation of the touristic experiences and, it creates a market of its own (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). Thus, gastronomy has a significant influence on the touristic experiences providing a unique tangible local cultural experiences where tourist can enjoy the attraction by using their senses – visual appeal, taste, smell, hearing the story (heritage) behind the food/cooking.

### 4.0 SINGAPORE AS A GASTRONOMIC DESTINATION



Figure 01 (left): Location of Singapore in the world map (Source: mapsofworld.com)

Figure 02 (right): Singapore in the map of Southeast Asia (Source: ThoughtCo via Wikipedia)

Singapore is a small island nation in Southeast Asia (see Figure 1 & Figure 2) with a land area of only 247 square miles which was founded by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1820. It was formally known as *Singapura*, derived from Sanskrit language which means lion (singa) city (pura). Singapore is a very multi-culturally diverse society, dominated by four major ethnic groups: Chinese, Indian, Malay and Eurasian, and the most economically developed nation in the Southeast Asia (Ooi, 2011). Pre-colonial Singapore was a temporary trade hub and home to many small fishing communities (Miksic & Low, 2005). After the colonisation, the foundation of economic growth and population growth of the island was contributed by the port which was used as a transshipment port by the British within the Malaya region (Tarulevicz, 2013).

Singapore exhibits signs of cultural homogeneity due to its globalization and internationalization, but it has had a history of exposure to outside influences and a fluid culture that is neither wholly Asian nor Western (Ang & Stratton, 1995). Multiculturalism, diversity and ethnicity make Singapore a blend of culture where East meets West. Comparatively new compared to its neighbors, Singapore has grown as an iconic port destination over the years where many travelled from the south of Mainland China in search of work, from India, from Middle East as a traders and citizens from Britain, the colonial ruler of Singapore until the 1950s, and the rest of Europe make this tiny nation as their home (Henderson, 2014). Thus, migrants define the culture of Singapore and make it as a multi-cultural society, an essential factor for the great variety of cuisines in Singapore.

As a free port, Singapore benefits from the flow of goods not only from Britain but from around the world. Goods such as spices, edible bird nest, shark fins, mother-of-pearl, gold, tin, rattan, and camphor flowed in from the Malay Archipelago (Tarulevicz, 2013). As a port city, Singapore is embraced with global culture. Port cities normally function as trade hub for the movement of goods, labour and capital but also considered as places for cultural exchange, knowledge and information (Frost, 2002). Such conditions provide favorable space for cultural mixing and hybridisation (Tan, 2007). Thus a natural meeting place of foreigners and locals where ‘races, cultures and ideas as well as goods from a variety of places jostle, mix and enrich each other and the life of the city’ (Murphey, 1989; p.225 cited in Tan, 2007).

The Chinese migrants constitute several different language groups or clans whose distinct cooking styles by geographical origin settle and make Singapore their home (Liu, 2011). Similarly, for Indian community, more than half of them were Tamil, then Malayalees with smaller groups like the Punjabis, Telugus, Sindhis and Gujaratis, including migrants from the neighboring countries such as Thai Malays and Indonesians. Each of these different ethnic group has brought their own cuisine to Singapore. All these different culture and ethnic groups including Europeans, have shaped Singapore’s culinary landscape (Eber-Lim, 1992). Thus, Singapore cuisine is one of the culturally diverse cuisine in the world which could be a potential tourist attraction. Over the year Singaporean government has recognised this huge potential as an important contributor to the tourism industry as well as country’s economy (Singapore Tourism Board, 2018). Now, food is considered a valuable and a major tourism attraction in Singapore.

Singapore as a multicultural city, blends various cultures and flavours especially in terms of culinary delicacies incorporating innumerable flavours, aromas and delicacies in her palates. This embraces the first wave of globalisation that ushered in which was to determine the country’s succeeding food culture. In 1919, opening of the first local food centre (food court) brand ‘Kopitium’ become national tapestry (Tarulevicz, 2013). A food centre or food court in Singapore, comprises various ethnic food outlets selling their food in an indoor complex. Diners need to share a table with others – a possible place for socializing with other ethnic or cultural group. A unique gastronomic experience that difficult to find in another destination.

Another significant cuisine that Singapore offers is Peranakan cuisine – also termed as ‘Nonya cuisine’, locally referred to woman who are notable of preparing complex food that requires extensive time of preparations and heavily reliance on spices (Tan, 2007). It also combines the Chinese cooking techniques and ingredients with Malaysian and Indonesian spices and flavour (Ng & Ab Karim, 2016.). The food preparation is also influenced by Thai, Indian, Dutch, Portuguese, and English techniques.

Peranakan normally refers to the Chinese traders who moved to Southeast Asia from the seventeenth century onwards and married local Malay women (Henderson, 2014). Since then, the Peranakans maintained a Chinese identity but developed their own creole language of Hokkien-Malay and absorbed aspects of Malay life (Rudolph, 1998). The word Peranakan is originated from either Malaysia or Indonesia that comes with multiple meanings. Most commonly it signifies locally born or the offspring of intermarriage between a local and a foreigner who normally a seafarer from Fujian or Guandong (Ng & Ab Karim, 2016).



Image 01: **Singapore Laksa** (Source: *thebestsingapore.com*)



Image 02: **Bah Kut Teh** (Source: *rotinrice.com*)

One of the most famous Peranakan dishes is ‘laksa’ which combines Chinese and Malay flavours with those of South India and even boasts a Eurasian influence (Henderson, 2014). Laksa is a thick rice vermicelli with a curry gravy of spices, chilies, coconut milk, small sun-dried prawns and laksa leaves. Another famous dish ‘bah kut teh (pork rib tea)’, this is a consommé that made with pork-bone and Chinese tea. This is a healthy soup that has roots in Cantonese or Hokkien origin. Similarly, ‘rojak’, a salad of sprouted beans, green vegetables, tau pok (vegetable stuffed with fried tofu), you tiao (fried dough sticks), pineapple, cucumber and peanuts tossed with a prawn paste that has roots in Malaysia, India and China.



Image 03: **Indian Rojak** (Source: *makansutra.com*)



Image: 04: **Eurasian Devil's Curry** (Source: *rotinrice.com*)

Given the facts of Singapore’s historical and cultural context, food has been promoted by Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (now known as Singapore Tourism Board) since Singapore open to the world as a tourism destination as one of the several compelling reason for visiting Singapore (Chua & Rajah, 1997). Representing food and foodways, Singapore is characterised by a wide variety of cuisine that are iconic of presence of different

ethnic communities which make up the nation, reflecting the nation categorization as ‘multiracial’ nation (Chua & Rajah, 1997).



Image 05: Newton Hawker Centre (Source: www.northernsights.net)



Image 06: Tekka Food Court



Image 07: Lau Pa Sat (Source: thewanderingmind.nl)



Image 08: Food Junction (Source: straitstimes.com)

The Singapore Tourism Board promises a “world of flavours” emanating from a “rich multicultural heritage” (STB, 2012a), but there is ambiguity about the existence of a national cuisine. As from the above discussion it has been seen that Singapore’s indigenous cuisine could be influenced by Malay (the same as Malaysia) cuisine and also similar to that of Indonesian cuisine (Hutton, 2008). Nevertheless, Singapore offers wide range of gastronomic cuisine from around the world that includes Micheline star restaurants, other western fine dining, celebrity chef restaurants and even Chinese and Indian fine dining restaurants which is pretty much uncommon within the region.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

This paper explored the variety of food and cuisines in Singapore and provided insights to how and why the food culture of Singapore is an important tourism resource. Drawing on the variety and diversity of culinary traditions as well as the intangible cultural heritage of Singapore, this study suggests that food in Singapore is more than just a resource – it is an experience that provides a window to the cultural diversity, ethnicity and heritage. However, we also recognize the lack of research on food culture, gastronomy and food heritage in Singapore and in particular, how food contributes towards the emergence and sustenance of the destination image of Singapore as a culturally and ethnically diverse destination.

We argue that there is a lack of research on food heritage and gastronomic traditions in Singapore and more conceptual and empirical studies are needed in two dimensions. First, food traditions in Singapore should be

explored from a cultural/anthropological perspectives and more research is needed to study the cultural influences on food production, presentation and preservation of local customs (for instance, the role of food as inheritance of intangible heritage). Second, more empirical and particularly qualitative studies, are needed to explore the role of food culture and gastronomy from an 'experience' perspective. Empirical studies can investigate the role of ethnic restaurants and their contribution to the image of Singapore as a gastronomic destination or study how different cultures have contributed to the emergence of unique food tourism products and experiences.

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## IMAGES & FIGURES

Figure 01: Location of Singapore in the world map, downloaded from URL: [www.mapsofworld.com](http://www.mapsofworld.com).

Figure 02: Map of Southeast Asia, highlighting the location of Singapore. via Wikipedia available at URL: <https://www.thoughtco.com/faq-about-singapore-195082>

Image 01: Singapore Laksa available at URL: [www.thebestsingapore.com](http://www.thebestsingapore.com)

Image 02 and Image 04: Bah Kut Teh available at URL: [www.rotinrice.com](http://www.rotinrice.com)

Image 03: Indian Rojak available at URL: [www.makansutra.com](http://www.makansutra.com)

Image 05: Newton Hawker Centre available at URL: [www.northernsights.net](http://www.northernsights.net)

Image 06: Tekka Food Court (author's image).

Image 07: Lau Pa Sat available at URL: [www.thewanderingmind.nl](http://www.thewanderingmind.nl)

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