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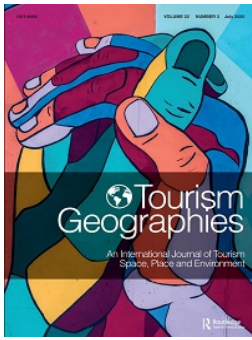


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'We and our stories': constructing food experiences in a UNESCO gastronomy city

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ABSTRACT

The experiential elements of food tourism can be transformed into meaningful experiences of local food heritage and identity in the context of a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy. From a local stakeholder perspective, six key drivers at three phases of the food experience are identified, and each driver involves several local elements that are coordinated and staged in various modes to create and develop four sequential food experiences. The pre-travel stage should focus on enhancing potential tourist's awareness of the UNESCO designation. The on-site food experience is found to be twofold: exposure to the local food environment and the actual tasting experience in situ. The food experience is claimed to continue beyond the post-travel stage where one's memory is triggered by stimuli and reflection. These create the ultimate local food experience for tourists, but it is the unique local identity that is critical from the local stakeholder perspective.

摘要

在联合国教科文组织美食创意城市的背景下，美食旅游的体验元素可以转化为当地美食遗产和身份的有意义的体验。从当地利益相关者的角度来看，在美食体验的三个阶段确定了六个关键驱动因素，每个驱动因素涉及到几个当地元素，这些元素以不同的模式协调和展演，从而创造和发展出四个连续的美食体验。旅行前阶段应注重提高潜在游客对教科文组织指定的美食的认识。发现现场的美食体验有两个方面：接触当地的美食环境和现场的实际品尝体验。据说，在旅行结束后，人们的记忆会被刺激和反思所触发，而美食体验会继续下去。这些为游客创造了终极的当地美食体验，但从当地利益相关者的角度来看，独特的当地身份是至关重要的。

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饮食文化;
社区;
身份;
记忆;
美食目的地营销;
泰国

Introduction

Food is often described as 'an identifier of a place' (Wilk, 2008) and invites tourists to engage with a destination in various tasteful ways. Local food resources are inherently related to tradition, history, and culture, with a growing interest in culinary heritage, having diverse implications for tourism (re)development and tourist food

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experience (Bessi re, 2013; Everett, 2012; Kang et al., 2019; Kim & Iwashita, 2016). Regardless of whether food traditions remain, food resources are seen as the essence of food culture and heritage in locale, creating added values for anticipated tourist experiences from a production perspective (Pfeilstetter, 2015).

The literature has predominantly examined food experiences from the tourist perspective (Ellis et al., 2018), largely neglecting the significance of the local stakeholder perspective on the subject matter with few exceptions (Everett, 2012; Kim & Iwashita, 2016). The perspective of local stakeholders is of paramount importance in cultural destinations, where collective and cooperative efforts of preservation and promotion of local food tradition and culture are under pressure (Gyim thy & Mykletun, 2009; Kim & Ellis, 2015; Orbasli & Woodward, 2009).

The urgency of food culture and heritage conservation is recognised by UNESCO (Romagnoli, 2019). Alongside the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO recently introduced the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (hereafter UCCN) as a new paradigm to further appreciate the intangible heritage assets and to leverage regional development. Additionally, UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy (hereafter UCCG) targets food assets, such as food and culinary culture, and food heritage, to build a creative food tourism industry. In this context, it is expected that locals in a destination with a 'UNESCO' designation, are more cognizant of the opportunity to utilise and develop a food culture and heritage as a tourism product, which will be reflected in the food tourism experience. This has yet to be proven.

Limited attention has been paid to those elements of a destination that are designed and staged to create ultimate food experiences for tourists during pre-visit, on-site, and post-travel stages. It is largely due to the fact that with the predominant focus on the on-site stage, previous studies tend to overlook the pre-purchase and post-purchase stages from the suppliers or local stakeholders' perspective, though it forms important part of the total value in the context of experience marketing (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009).

To fill these critical research gaps, the local's view is of paramount importance, since the identification, repackaging, commoditisation, promotion and trading of key elements of destination food experiences is required by relevant stakeholders at a destination. Given the scarcity of research on food tourism experiences in cultural heritage destinations, this research aims to discover what regional or local elements local food tourism stakeholders have identified and how they have perceived and used those elements to create ultimate food tourism experiences in the context of UCCG of Phuket in Thailand.

Literature review

Food experience, memory, and embodiment

Experience is stored in one's memory and influences its attitude and behaviour (Tsai, 2016). According to Maier et al. (2007), experience which originates from sensory aspects, is more remembered and influential. Our food experience invites all human sensory experiences including gustatory, olfactory, aural, and haptic senses (Everett,

2008; Kim et al., 2021), which ultimately stimulate more memorable and affective experiences (Lean, 2012). The food experience as a 'peak' or 'memorable' experience is evident with the destination's continuous use of food culture and heritage for tourism product (re)development and marketing (Tsai, 2016; Williams et al., 2019).

Food experience in a destination entails various activities, ranging from eating local food, to cooking local dishes and purchasing food souvenirs. Food souvenirs are material and symbolic reminders of the local food experience and sensory appraisal that evokes flavours, sights, and sounds of the toured site (Lin & Mao, 2015). Tourists psychologically and emotionally recall such sensorial features and experiences through the taste and aroma (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016).

Food experience is also defined as an embodied experience by nature, because food experience goes beyond the ocularcentrism nature of tourism experience (Everett, 2008). The essential food experience is tasting. Perullo's (2016) anthropological approach to what makes taste an experience, finds the meaning of tasting to have dual functions: 1) exercising the sense of taste and receiving its impression, and 2) knowing what is tasted. The tasting experience is layered by firstly, 'naked pleasure', which comes from the instant reception of sensation, and secondly 'dressed taste', created by aesthetic relation, mostly with culture and locality. Learned knowledge and culture enhance pleasure, and thus, taste, intertwining of sensation and cognition, constitutes 'a complex perceptual system' (Perullo, 2016, p. 5).

As such, food experience is an outcome of the tourist's active engagement with the toured object and its contexts and their emotional response to it (Staiff, 2014). The tourist's engagement and associated reactions and responses do not happen in a single moment but develop during the circular phases of the tourist journey from pre-visit, on-site experience, to post-visit (Boniface & Cooper, 2009). Research on a destination's experiential elements comprising each phase of food tourism, however, remains under-researched.

Socio-cultural construction of food and foodways

Each society has its own food and foodways that are 'must-have' or 'must-develop' cultural capitals. Food is contextual rather than factual, and thus, broad food experiences are described by spatial, temporal and social dimensions. In this regard, knowing about why, when, and how to eat is an essential part of the food experience (Perullo, 2016).

Experiencing the foodways of other societies is assisted through the communication of social and cultural elements of food that signifies the local culture and identity (Ottenbacher & Harrington, 2013). Storytelling is well received as an effective method of interpretive communication and informal teaching that transforms unfamiliar to familiar, personalising the plot, character, and relationships to create and preserve vivid memories of stories for individuals (Swarp et al., 2001). In the context of food tourism, stories about socio-cultural aspects of consumed food that are intertwined with history, tradition, culture, customs, are tactics for shaping the social, cultural constructs of food experience of a destination. Therefore, correct interpretation should be staged in the right spot with the right timing (Kim et al., 2021).

An idea about food heritage and the meaning of local food is socially constructed through its ritual production and consumption, linkage to the unique milieu, or the purposeful use by certain socially distinctive groups (Di Giovine, 2014). It also explains the deep involvement of tourism in heritage construction, so-called heritagisation, as the process of identification, selection and legitimisation of the tourism system and its promotion (Bessière, 2013). Institutionalisation of foodways, and intangible heritage such as UNESCO designation targeting local food and culinary resources, plays a significant role in both preservation and promotion for tourism (Cheung, 2013; Romagnoli, 2019), although Gyimóthy and Mykletun (2009) place a greater emphasis on the latter.

Local food: a gastronomic identity of place and place making

Food has long been believed to convey personal and culture identities (Belasco, 1999) and imagery of public identity (Fine, 1996; Harrington & Ottenbacher, 2010). A widely cited sociologist, Gary Alan Fine (1996, p.1) says, 'food reveals our souls', highlighting the role of food in the creation of community whilst connecting identity with food production and consumption.

According to Harrington's (2005) framework of a region's gastronomic identity, the environment (e.g., geography and climate) and the culture (e.g., religions, history, ethnic diversity, innovations, capabilities, traditions, beliefs and values) influence the taste, texture and flavour of food. These are constantly evolving 'through a continuous interaction and evolution of fashion, tradition, culture and climate' (Harrington, 2005, p. 144). Food and place are therefore inseparably intertwined (Feagan, 2007).

In this regard, local food has a connotation of socially, geographically bound identity, and the symbolic and cultural values of food heritage intensify the sense of place (Fox, 2007). As such, local foods function as profitable cultural commodities for place making (Di Giovine, 2014; Kim & Iwashita, 2016). Feagan (2007) asserts that a mesh of authenticity and heritage manifested in local food can heighten or reform sense of place, on which place identity is formed (Harrington & Ottenbacher, 2010).

Sammells (2014) contends that local food is meaningful when interacting with international tourists, if it is diverse, internationally influential and appealing to a wider consumer. In this regard, Fox's (2007) gastrospeak, (a discourse practice of all types of gastronomy-related topics is factored into making a place equipped with gastronomic identity), suggests local food becomes an anchor for creating narratives of the place (Everett, 2016). Thus, place making via the cultural brand of local food, especially in tourism, readily creates a viable market (Presenza & Del Chiappa, 2013).

Local food can develop gastronomic images for a destination because of its uniqueness and representation of the place (Chang & Mak, 2018; Kim & Iwashita, 2016). Tourist's gastronomic image of the place is however, not static; rather it is constructed and reconstructed by the tourist's geographical knowledge of place and the food associated with it (Kim & Ellis, 2015); wherein the interrelationship between the provider and consumer is highlighted (Cook & Crang, 1996). In addition, the role of institutions such as UNESCO in connecting local to global can transform food heritage

and foodways to a commodity via conceptualisation, commoditisation and marketing (Sammells, 2014).

Methods

Research context

This research was conducted in Phuket, located in the southern part of Thailand (Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), n.d.). Apart from the sun, sand, and sea of the island, the unique culture and heritage of the region provide tourism opportunities, and food culture is one of them. Phuket has been a settlement site for Portuguese, Muslim, and Chinese migrants, because its port was the major trade area west of the Malay Peninsula. Inheriting Western and Chinese cultures, Old Phuket Town (hereafter OPT) was developed, and a unique cultural landscape was created, containing Chinese Baroque and Straits architecture and buildings, known as the Sino-Portuguese style. The OPT remains the centre for preserving the traditional landscape, history and ethnic culture. The resulting townscape, shaped by the mixed Portuguese and Chinese arts incorporating Thai influences, easily evokes a sense of diverse cultures and a uniqueness for Phuket that one seldom associates with the image of Thailand.

The dynamic relationship developed from inherited food resources of various ethnic groups led to the development of a unique Southern Thai food. The Peranakan, so-called half Chinese and half Thai, and their food culture has long been featured in the multi-cultural society of Phuket. The efforts and commitment to preserving such uniqueness and creativity of the Southern Thai food have enabled Phuket to become the centre for food tourism destinations in Thailand, and the promotion of food heritage is highlighted in the annual Old Town Festival.

Food and culinary resources have been recognised as a strategic asset for city (re)development, and Phuket has been a member of the UCCN since 2015 (Phuket City of Gastronomy of UNESCO, n.d.). The growing membership of UCCG demonstrates that one's attitudes towards local food increasingly include consideration for conservation as well as food resources, and these become a strategic factor for sustainable place development in economic, cultural, environmental and social terms (UCCN, n.d.).

Research design, data collection and analysis

This study takes an interpretive approach that allows interactions between researchers and participants through which the researchers can understand the studied phenomenon via the respondents' social contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and construct knowledge via various knowledge, experiences, and perspectives of the respondents (Schwandt, 1994).

In-depth interviews with the identified local stakeholders in food tourism, were deemed appropriate to explore the identification and coordination of the experiential elements of the region from a food tourism development perspective. It was based on participant's own reflections on the phenomenon of food tourism and the interviewee's lengthy experience in the relevant tourism businesses. Key interview questions

focussed on, but were not limited to: (1) how they define the destination food experience and what elements are considered significant; (2) their perception of tourist's involvement in their offerings of experiences; (3) the meaning and value of food tourism to the destination; and (4) the strengths and challenges of food tourism development in the destination.

In addition, an on-site visit was performed for site observation and collection of secondary resources from the TAT Phuket office. Both the fieldwork and interviews were conducted in June 2018 in various areas of OPT. This included an inner island for observation of food tours; an up-scale cooking class; the heritage food precinct and night market; and the outer coastal fringes, where cooking classes and street foods are located close to major tourist beach areas.

In-depth interviews were conducted using purposive sampling in conjunction with snowball sampling methods. The eligibility of samples in this study was representative of local food tourism and UCCG: samples were relevant to the destination's experiential elements of food and food culture, representing a range of social, cultural and environmental aspects that had evolved at the destination. As such, this research targeted local stakeholders who are familiar with local contexts, including a recent city-wide project of UCCG as shown in Table 1, in addition to credible business experience of food tourism in Phuket.

A local food tour operator was introduced by a renowned Thai food blogger, and afterwards snowball sampling enabled a reach of 10 local stakeholders in total. Iterative responses on the subject were already noticed during the first few interviews, representing different business sectors including a restaurant, tour guide, food speciality production and government, although interviews continued until the 10th interview to enable re-confirmation that data had become highly saturated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). It is assumed that a relatively homogenous group of respondents had common

Table 1. Sample profiles.

Respondent	Gender	Age	Business category (Role)	Years of the current business	Residence in Phuket	Awareness of UCC project in Phuket
R1	Female	50s	Government (Officer)	18	Yes	Yes
R2	Male	40s	Casual restaurant (Manager)	20	Yes	Yes
R3	Male	40s	Upscale Restaurant (Manager)	10	Yes	Yes
R4	Female	40s	Cooking class (Owner and instructor)	8	Yes	Yes
R5	Female	50s	Cooking class (Owner and instructor)	15	Yes	Yes
R6	Male	30s	Food tour operator (Tour coordinator)	17	Yes	Yes
R7	Male	50s	Food speciality (including food souvenirs) production (Owner)	26	Yes	Yes
R8	Male	50s	Tour guide (Specialised in food tour)	10	Yes	Yes
R9	Female	50s	Tour guide (Specialised in food tour)	20	Yes	Yes
R10	Male	50s	UNESCO Creative City (UCCG project leader)	7	Yes	Yes

views and perspectives on the examined subject matter, given the fact that all respondents had been living in Phuket as a resident for most of their lives and had been involved in food tourism businesses on average for more than seven years in the OPT and the wider city.

The interviews were undertaken in the respondent's business office or public place, such as a hotel lobby. Both Thai and English were used, depending on the interviewee's preference, and each interview took approximately 40-100 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed in English for data analysis. NVivo12 was used for data coding, and a thematic analysis method was used to process the coding of textual data; grouping and identifying them into manageable key themes (Ayres, 2008). A summary of identifying themes is found in Appendix (Supplementary material).

Findings and discussions

This study identifies six key drivers at three phases of the food experience, and each driver involves several local elements that are coordinated and staged in various modes to create and develop four sequential food experiences: awareness; exposure to the local environment; tasting experience driven by sensory and cognitive experiences; and memory. Figure 1 exhibits a comprehensive composition model of food tourism experiences from the local stakeholders' perspectives discovered in this study.

The respondents collectively highlighted that UCCG represents the distinctive gastronomic identity of Phuket and serves as a focal point for all food-related experiences that benefit tourists. As such, the food experience as the epitome of local identity in Phuket, was constantly mentioned during the interviews: *'...most important element is identity...'* (R10), *'...we make the local food to make Phuket different from other parts of Thailand...'* (R2), *'flavour and ingredients reflect southern recipes'* (R6). The following sections provide details of each experience phase, representing the informant's own voices and thoughts.



Figure 1. Key drivers, experiential elements, and modes of food experiences: Local stakeholders' perspectives.

Pre-travel: enhancing awareness of a food tourism destination

The stakeholders recognised that the current situation lacks marketing strategies to create a deeper awareness of Phuket as a global food tourism destination. The local tourism stakeholders had been eager to attract more diverse tourists to the town by promoting the food and gastronomy specialist culture. The hope is that food tourism may mitigate the ongoing seasonality, and gradually replace the predominant beach holiday market segment with more culturally conscious, educated tourists. Such tourists are perceived as ones more willing to explore Phuket in depth, taking different perspectives. A tour guide (R8) commented that *'Food tourists have a lot of knowledge about Thailand as well'*.

The respondents commented that not many tourists were aware of Phuket for its gastronomic speciality prior to their travel, and thus they still perceived great potential from the UNESCO label to create an enhanced awareness of Phuket's gastronomic merits. As the UCCG project leader commented, *'Not many people know about OPT [as UCCG], but food experience is available in the town, and we want to share the story and (food) culture having the new name'* (R10). Meanwhile, all interviewees strongly perceived that the UNESCO award is widely known by the locals, but a lack of adequate marketing techniques raised questions about how to make the most of externally endorsed credentials and outcomes that were achieved during the endorsement process.

A series of activities took place across the town as part of the UCCG project. The most crucial aspect from the local perspective, is the preservation of ethnic and/or local food, whilst taking the first step to making local food more widely available, so that ultimately it can be recognised as an iconic food contributing to food tourist's awareness. For example, Peranakan food, which remained part of the local ethnic tradition of Phuket, was prioritised for relaunching and increased accessibility; high-end local restaurant owners supported such efforts by serving long forgotten dishes, such as *Moo-Hong*.

The UCCG project leader believed that further development of activities under the UNESCO Creative City scheme would make Peranakan food more viable and accessible to a wider tourist population. Not only Peranakan, but more extensive Southern eating styles, recipes, and local cuisine were expected to be kept and shared with both locals and tourists. Food as an identity marker (Romagnoli, 2019) is confirmed in this study, as the communities recognised and had confidence in their gastronomic identity on which they have built a strong sense of belonging and the belief that it will attract more food tourists.

Local tour operators and tour guides in particular, hoped to utilise more cultural resources for marketing and promotion of Phuket's UCCG designation, specifically the newly created set of graffiti in the OPT. Celebrating Phuket's joining of the UCCG in 2015, the Food Art Town Phuket initiative was founded in 2016. The street art graffiti is an expression of a local food culture in a visualised manner. Predominantly, it was the outcome of a group of graffiti artists, who worked collaboratively to complete the mural project across the town illustrating thematically, the local lives, events, customs and cultural norms represented in the distinctive food and foodways of the locality (see [Figures 2 and 3](#)).



Figure 2. Graffiti in Old Phuket Town - Home Kitchen (Source: Author).



Figure 3. Graffiti in Old Phuket Town - Food Trolley (Source: Author).

Respondent 10 witnessed that tourists enjoyed collecting and viewing the whole set of graffiti by walking down the street, and a tour guide (R9) commented that tourist's sharing of the graffiti photos via social media could be utilised to promote the UCCG. The visual appeal of the murals would stimulate potential tourist's curiosity for the stories behind the artwork and ultimately generate interest in Phuket's unique food culture and identity. This is an area that has been largely neglected by locals. In this regard, the respondents postulated that more proactive marketing and promotion by public and private sectors was necessary, and that social media should be emphasised, saying '*social media creates a great impact on spreading out the information about local food*' (R2).

It is evident that the new title given to Phuket as a UCCG was viewed as an unmissable opportunity for the locals to develop and capitalise on food tourism, as the efficacy of UNESCO designation on tourism (Sammells, 2014) is expected to change the attitudes of tourists towards eating unfamiliar food on holiday (VanBlarcom & Kayahan, 2011). A tour operator (R9) commented that the biggest challenge while guiding international tourists was to make them try the local food because tourists were often reluctant to try, despite their genuine interest in the local experience.

Also, restaurants and tour operators persuaded tourists to try Peranakan food in situ without much success, simply due to a lack of tourist awareness, based on their reflections. In this regard, tour operators and tour guides commonly believed that a more inclusive, active promotion of such features will boost tourist's readiness to broaden their opinions, and thus prior awareness could help tour guides communicate more easily regarding the culturally unique food of Phuket and its potential as a food tourism hub.

On-site experience: exposure to the local food environment

The local stakeholders perceived the on-site food experience on two levels: the environmental and contextual understanding, and the tasting experience around the regional cuisine and local food. They perceived that tourists were keen to learn about local foodways, and the foremost step to do so was to become immersed in the local context of food and form a 'sense of locality'. The respondents collectively regarded sense of locality as a welcoming orientation for subsequent tasting experiences which is best formed in the physical setting, such as graffiti in the historic area, food precincts, and local markets, together with the unique architectural style of the food outlets, for they provide places in which to be psychologically familiar with food culture and culinary customs (Kim & Iwashita, 2016).

The local tour guides (R8 and 9) and tour operator (R6) explained that guided walking tours (of cultural and heritage sites, local markets, and street food precincts) along with cooking classes showcase the key elements of the locality. The walking tours were mentioned as the most popular choice for tourists wanting to embrace the gastronomic culture and heritage. Cultural heritage fused with the surroundings of foodways, was viewed as a compelling marker which distinguished Phuket from other regions in Thailand, as a tour operator commented below:

When tourists walk around OPT, they have a lot of questions ... Most of them enjoy the town, food, and food stories, because it's really different from Bangkok or Chiang Mai. It is because we have our own style, our own culture. (R6)

Tour guides and the UCCG project leader highlighted the street art as the most visible demonstration of Phuket's distinctive foodways; which attracted resident's and tourist's attention and has become a stimulus for navigating the town. This has become a rite of passage for tourists as a 'must-do' in OPT. What is expressed in the murals is essentially incorporated into the tour guide's interpretation of the local gastronomic identity that practises Fox's (2007) *gastrospeak*; which enables all the users to join the gastronomic community so that local gastronomic knowledge is maintained and exchanged, also acting as a medium of communication and one's social identification.

By way of example, a tour guide (R9) who accompanied the authors during the fieldwork explained that the mural 'Home Kitchen', as presented in [Figure 2](#), represents and symbolises the multicultural family common in Phuket society. It depicts a Thai Auntie in the centre with an Asian-looking young girl on the left and a man wearing Muslim dress; their grocery baskets filled with Thai veggies, and the four-tier Peranakan tiffin carrier as commonly used in Phuket life. [Figure 3](#) introduces traditional Phuket street food, called *Oh Tao*, which is made with flour and taro, and the tour guide explained that it is common in Phuket to enjoy street food which is consumed at home in people's everyday lives.

The street food and the local market were stressed as the conduit through which tourists became closer to local culture and lifestyle. The respondents recalled that their tourists often enjoyed learning about the local produce, buying fresh foods and fruits, and observing how residents buy groceries in the local markets. Respondent 8 stated that:

The price in Phuket, as you know, is different depending on where you eat. Street food is very locally priced, not overcharged, and flexible though a vendor calls a price. Our customers have fun with negotiation, and they enjoy our food culture and lifestyle while observing in the local markets.

The places common to local daily life like a wet market, are conventionally perceived as non-tourism places, where the exchange of both material and symbolic resources is exclusively for local residents (Kim & Park, 2021). This kind of non-tourism place has become extraordinary, allowing tourists to taste the local's ordinary life in their quest for authentic experiences. Respondent 6 stated that '*when it comes to food tourism, we don't always have to go somewhere nice and beautiful. We bring the tourists somewhere unknown to let them learn the way of life of the locals.*'

Cooking classes are as popular as wet market tours, because tourists are involved in several local food spaces from the wet market to the local kitchen. It was noted that during the participant observations, tourist's engagement with and interest in the local food space was greater when classes took place in the instructor's house

or in a traditional Thai-styled kitchen. The participants of cooking classes got to understand different cookery tools and ingredients, especially Thai herbs, as well as serving methods, whilst producing their own dishes and consuming what they cooked on site. Food as an embodied experience enabled tourists to learn local foodways and immediately behave like the locals (Everett, 2008, 2019; Perullo, 2016), as Respondent 4 stressed the tourist's active engagement with everything in local style commenting that:

All the process is done by tourists. We only explain why using this ingredient over others and the process of cooking in local style. They chop and prepare the ingredients by themselves...act like me, local people. They are not learning Thai food in elsewhere but in Phuket.

On-site experience: tasting experience

Sensory experience of food

The sensory experience was reported, regarding sensation as the immediate impression of the quality and intensity of food intake (Perullo, 2016). The respondents collectively mentioned the southern spiciness, balanced taste, freshness of herbs, and visual appeal of the colourful Thai food that created the distinctively authentic Phuket cuisine. The restaurant owners and cooking class instructors collectively remarked tourists' perception of southern Thai food as spicy. Respondent 6 commented that tourists perceive the regional difference of Thai foods by strong flavour:

I've asked tourists who've been to Bangkok before Phuket how they enjoyed our food in Phuket. They felt that Bangkok food is lighter but sweeter. That is true. Even universal Thai menu, green or red curry, we have a stronger flavour, due to southern style herbs and condiments. We eat hotter and spicier than people in Bangkok.

Meanwhile, all respondents claimed that the gustatory sensorial experience is the most important aspect of the food experience, similar to other studies (Kim et al., 2019, 2021; Mak et al., 2017). They expected tourists to experience the balanced taste of spicy, sweet, sour, and salty as a feature of Southern Thai food. An upscale restaurant manager puts a greater emphasis on the balanced taste as quoted:

Thai food is a complexity of tastes: sweet, sour, salty, spicy or whatever. Spiciness may come first, but it's more like a balance of the five flavours. Five flavours come directly from the spices; for example, the green curry paste is made of more than 20 spices mixed to serve them with a balanced taste of food from the original recipe. (R3)

Similarly, the government officer (R1) highlighted the importance of ingredients for sensorial appraisal of eating Thai foods, saying that '*freshness is the most important ingredient in Phuket*'. The freshness of herbs, spices, and vegetables was a vehicle for sensorial experience, which was also observed in the cooking classes, in which instructors frequently mentioned the creation of multi-layered sensations in the mouth using herbs and a unique local style for preparing ingredients. Respondent 5 exemplifies the local's view saying that '*for the food in Phuket, the smell is excellent. The dishes have their own aroma, and tourists can taste the unique flavour and experience through their all five senses*'. The locals appraise the southern style, meaning the distinctive tastes and flavours is the gastronomic identity of Phuket (Harrington, 2005).

Similar to previous studies (Kim et al., 2013, 2019; Mak et al., 2017), the visual appeal of local dishes was also highlighted, although the respondents collectively remarked that the colourful visual appeal is related more to local foodways. One meal can appear beautiful yet extravagant, with all dishes served simultaneously. This is because in Thai culture, the food on the table is to be shared among the diners, which contrasts to Western culture where food is individually set for each person.

Respondents generally had a good understanding of sensory experiences of food in association with the human's physiological reaction to food consumption. This finding adds new knowledge of the oriental philosophy of the relationship between food and health, being part of a holistic sensory experience of food in addition to the five senses. Respondent 7 described as follow:

When the food is served, we see and smell, and then eat. If the food is hot and spicy, usually because of chilli, pepper, or ginger, it makes our body warm so helps digestion, which is good for health. Food affects our body before, during and after eating; we feel our body cool or sweat. Our physiological response to the ingredients is also part of food experience.

Cognitive experience of food

The tasting experience from the local stakeholder's view was intended to be profoundly designed, and the use of tangible, mostly built heritage and intangible heritage, including multiculturalism of local food, was directly linked to food production and services which enhance tasting experiences so they become richer and more authentic. Such cognitive aspects of food influence tourist's tasting experience (Kim et al., 2021), where tasting means 'correctly perceiving a substance's immediate taste, also its subsequent recognition following an investigation' (Perullo, 2016, p. 61). As such, the local food experience should provide ample opportunities of tourist's investigation for knowing about the social, cultural, spatial, temporal information.

Food production and the services sector is particularly distinctive, where innovation through carefully crafted interpretations, a service mindset, and adaptation to contemporary demands are significant in creating a thriving industry. Firstly, the local descendant's stories about tradition and history provided the foundation for food business innovation, which enabled tourists to experience local food in situ and consume and bring the stories and memories back home. This is salient in the food speciality and (in)authentic souvenir production business which is often market-orientated (Soukhathammavong & Park, 2019), but the cases interviewed in this study wisely compromised food production with demand in an innovative way. A local entrepreneur (R7) stated that:

We have to develop the product to meet the needs and should keep up with food consumption trends because we have both local and international (tourist) customers... We do not change the original elements, but a little twist leads to innovation. For example, we present the same product in different packages that tailor different demands.

What he meant by innovation was not only a new way of tailoring for differing market demands, but designing food experiences using ready-made local food products. This company, renowned for Southern Thai food speciality products, has

used in promotion and consumption are recognized as fundamental in the successful UNESCO designation (Di Giovine, 2014; Sammells, 2014).

Both local food service providers and vendors explained that the local food for Phuketians originating in the Southern region has a strong flavour resulting from many spices and the mix of cultures of Chinese Thai, Muslim Thai, and Malay Thai peoples. This finding exemplifies the cultural influence on tastes, textures and flavours of local food which makes up the distinctive gastronomic identity (Harrington, 2005) and provides a ground for the 'dressed' taste experience of local food (Perullo, 2016). The interviewees strongly recommended tourists to visit locally owned restaurants or food outlets, saying that '*local dishes got influenced by Peranakan, passing from generation to generation*' (R10); '*as Phuketians, we still use the same old style*' (R9); '*Tourists who explore local food are recommended to find the Thai owned restaurants*' (R2).

Lastly, different opinions emerged between the food tour operation sector and the food production sector. Although they all accommodated international tourists, the food tour operators were more aware of the local styles and local foodways when designing their tour itineraries. Meanwhile, the stakeholders whose business is inclined to the service experience, paid more attention to the modern food serving style. Both respondents 2 and 3 addressed that many restaurants in Phuket contemplated the shared food versus individual portion food serving style, and the decision in some was to replace the Thai serving style with the Western one to accommodate international tourists. In a similar vein, the food speciality producer also commented that innovations in traditional food are necessary to meet a diversified and sophisticated international tourist demand:

We try to encourage customers to buy our products, and they need food souvenirs. We emphasise innovation in tradition. We use the original style, but we add value to it and create a difference. We need to make customers feel satisfied with high service quality, and we should create a 'wow' experience... (R7)

As shown above and in other studies (Kim & Iwashita, 2016; Kim et al., 2019), the food production and service sector developing the local gastronomic experience, displayed an eclectic approach to the preservation of culinary heritage, believing that all the elements such as recipes, ingredients, and flavours of local and traditional dishes should remain, but the way of eating and serving the dishes could evolve to meet the needs of a modernised society and perhaps more importantly, their customers who come from heterogeneous social and cultural backgrounds.

Post-travel: memory

The post-travel stage regarding food tourism experiences as memory, has often been discussed as an activity of reflection (Stern, 1992). However, based on their lengthy experience with their customers, interviewees of this study perceived that a stimulus evokes sensory features of the gastronomic experience during the toured site, followed by reflective practice of experiences which are recreated later on through activities such as home cooking.

The respondents from all groups of stakeholders commented that tourists who remember the flavours of freshness, the complexities of herbs, and colourful displays

of Thai food would more likely miss Thai food when returning home. They also noted that the on-site, positive appraisal of sensory experiences of food often immediately encouraged tourists to purchase food souvenirs, including ingredients, food products, and food-themed crafts. Lin and Mao (2015) state that the sensory appraisal of food souvenirs is the essence of post-travel food experience, in terms of its ability to evoke flavours, sounds and sights of the attractions. The food tourism stakeholders in Phuket collectively supported this viewpoint from their own rich experience of tourists.

The local stakeholders highlighted that the physical food experiences and information obtained during the participation in the local food experience setting are reminiscent; the experience should be positive, and the information should be accessible. As such, all the cooking classes observed by the researchers during the site visit provided their recipe books to class participants with other memorabilia such as aprons, branded ornaments or locally produced dried herbs, to trigger fond memories when returning home.

Such marketing efforts can collectively function beyond mere descriptions of the experience during a single encounter, to create emotional benefits of souvenirs and tailored memorabilia associated with a valued set of local food experiences (Pizzichini et al., 2020). Nevertheless, it is noted that multiculturalism of the local identity, through cognitive appreciation as emphasised by the interviewees, is less incorporated into the memory collection stage and requires stakeholder's attention to further progress within the UCCG network.

The stakeholders involved in tour operation, tour guiding, and cooking classes commonly pointed out that tourists, once returning home with good impressions of on-site experiences, are likely to feel nostalgic, which is often triggered by social media content from the additional on-site experiences as well as Thai restaurants in their home environment. They witnessed that their customers that were tourists were encouraged to practice cooking Thai food at home as a reflective action of their previous food experience; to keep food souvenirs, particularly dried ingredients, herbs and condiments which are the typical of the local food and the southern Thai food identity (Ilbery et al., 2003), readily reminding and connecting them to place (Sims, 2009).

Conclusion

This research develops a conceptualised model of the multiple stages of food experience in a food tourism destination and identifies key drivers, local elements and modes of creating local food experiences from a local stakeholder perspective. The context is Phuket in Thailand as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy; a place that has unique food discourses cultivated through local culture, heritage and history. It was evident that the food culture and food identity have long been embedded in the everyday life of Phuketians, and the UNESCO designation helps the destination better identify the elements of local food culture, and develop appropriate methods to engineer discrete aspects of food experiences throughout the multiple stages of the tourism experience.

The formation of heritage through local food and its legitimisation through UNESCO designation has created high expectations for the potential of food tourism development amongst local food tourism stakeholders. Despite this, it does not automatically lead to a high level of awareness for food tourism, nor immediate changes in tourist's perceptions of the destination. Thus, systematic and continuous efforts in marketing and promotion are required.

The relevant food tourism stakeholders attempted to identify, package, stage, and promote multiple elements of local food identities at the individual and collaborative level. Using the identified six key drivers at the point of sale within the three phases of the food experience, the aim is to create the ultimate food experience in Phuket. Each driver plays a different, but equally significant role in contributing to the creation of a food experience anchored in multicultural identity and subsequent food heritage in each stage.

It is important to note that the drivers are interrelated, interdependent and interconnected through negotiated (re)production (Ateljevic, 2000). Both the production (that is, the destination and its local stakeholders) and consumption (that is, tourists) as the key actors lead to a mechanism or framework that conceptualises an 'ultimate food tourism experience' as a nexus of circuits, similar to what Ateljevic (2000) describes as 'circuits of tourism'.

This study is contextualised in the UCCG which is a contemporary movement that identifies cultural resources and creatively utilises their merit for the city development contributing to its conservation and promotion. Whilst the conventional idea regarding heritage and tradition is considered old-fashioned and by definition unattractive, this study demonstrates that food heritage and culture can become a strength and the basis for developing authentic attributes of a food tourism destination, especially when combined with innovation and creativity as a means of (re)negotiated (re)production. This study demonstrates the potential for food culture and heritage to become a driving force of place (re)making.

Innovative and creative interpretations significantly transform the culinary and gastronomic heritage as a distinctive food tourism experience, although a set of constant, collaborative marketing and promotion strategies still needs to be implemented. Tourist's awareness and cognitive willingness to learn and taste local cuisine in situ seldom become the pinnacle of the ultimate food experience when it is tasted. That is why the local stakeholders highlighted the importance of putting great emphasis on stimulating both cognitive and sensory experiences of local food. Cognitive experience is driven by informative communication practices and labelling, and promotion of local food is showcased in addition to the on-site offerings (Kim et al., 2021). In this regard, local food specialities and authentic souvenirs make a particular contribution to the so-called (re)negotiated (re)production of the ultimate food experience in the interactive space between the producers and consumers (Soukhathammavong & Park, 2019).

It is noteworthy that the local tourism suppliers' recognition of their role in the circle of tourism experiences, and thus their perception of the success, challenges, and expectations occurring during the three stages of tourism experience clearly exists. The three-stage model of tourism experience in early tourism studies was introduced to understand tourist's behaviour. However, the tourism experience is not

the sole regard of the tourist. The tourism service provider and the local stakeholder's role in the design and offerings of experiences are inevitably embedded at every stage and thus worthy of investigation. Currently, it remains under-researched. In this study, local food tourism stakeholders expressed that their involvement is not limited to the on-site offerings for the tourist's complete experience.

In this regard, Tynan and McKechnie (2009) postulated that suppliers tend to overlook the pre-purchase and post-purchase stages which form part of the total value. In the service dominant logic, emphasis is on the supplier's role of mobilising their resources, but not on offering the final product, thus helping tourists create their own value from the supplier's offerings (Norman & Ramirez, 1993). Therefore, this study provides the groundwork for a multiple stage approach to (food) tourism experience and is not exclusive to the study of tourists. Rather it should be extended to the study of suppliers and stakeholders in the context of creation and management of tourism experience offerings, to reflect the changing tourism environment.

Also, it provides broader implications for food tourism experience management at a destination level. Regional food experiences evoke a unique sense of place. As demonstrated in this study, all experiential elements are rooted in the destination. Identifying who we are and what we eat can be the starting point to identifying the elements of regional food experiences, as the relevant local stakeholders constantly referred to 'we'. The exclusivity of the local food heritage is the value-added experience, which implies that food tourism destinations will increasingly look to their past to capitalise on their edible heritage and identity.

Care must be taken as to how experience is developed, staged, and created for sustainable tourism opportunities. Preservation is prioritised in culinary heritage, but the use of culinary heritage for tourism also takes into consideration the contemporary tourist's lifestyle and associated food consumption. This study highlights that well designed, innovative and creative interpretations can enhance both cognitive and sensory experiences of local food, and food souvenirs. The commodification and reproduction of local food play a critical role in providing connections between the on-site and post-travel food experience.

Although this pioneering study uncovers the perception and involvement of local tourism stakeholders in the circle of tourism experience, the richness of data is still limited to the on-site stage of destination experience, since local stakeholder's experience-based reflection and perceptions are predominantly drawn from pre- and post-travel tourism experience design themes. A more holistic research is required for future research by supplementing existing data with the tourist's view. The created and/or staged food experience of a destination is incomplete without taking into consideration the tourist's involvement as co-creator of the food tourism experience. Thus, a holistic investigation into food experiences through the full travel lifespan (that is, pre-, on-site, and post-travel) can only be achieved by examining both production and consumption perspectives.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest is reported by the authors.

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