



Western Tourists Perception of Malaysian Gastronomic Products

Mohd Hairi Jalis

Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management

UiTM Terengganu, MALAYSIA

Mohd Salehuddin Mohd Zahari, Muhammad Izzat & Zulhan Othman

Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management

UiTM Malaysia, Selangor, MALAYSIA

E-mail: george_edz@yahoo.com

Abstract

Continual efforts have been made by international organizations to discover new tourism products and activities that have the opportunity of being marketed and promoted. Gastronomy has been identified as one of the new tourism product which is directly relevant to the Malaysian context. At present gastronomy is a valuable source of attracting tourists from all over the world and this has led to the empirical investigation on western tourists perception of Malaysian gastronomic products (food, beverages and food cultures). The sample population was randomly selected among the western tourists at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) who had consumed and experienced these gastronomic products during their vacation in Malaysia. Predominantly the data were based on self-completed questionnaires. A series of statistical analyses were employed by looking at the frequencies, mean scores and standard deviation through descriptive and parametric statistics. The results revealed that the majority of western tourists perceived that Malaysia offered great choices of tasty and freshly prepared food, snacks and beverages. The western tourists also perceived that Malaysia owned a unique and exquisite identity of food culture. In addition, the findings demonstrated that the local gastronomic products can be a catalyst for boosting the local economy.

Keywords: Malaysia, Gastronomic products, Perception and western tourist

1. Introduction

Tourism plays a significant role in the economic and financial health of most economies (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2006; Hall, 2003; Mohd Hairi, Mohd Salehuddin, Muhammad Izzat and Zulhan, 2007). Most countries in Asia for example, rely more on tourism receipts than on income derived from the exports of agricultural products or manufactured goods. Thus, a lot of emphasis is placed on addressing the need to set up the right logistics and develop the right infrastructure to bring in planeloads of tourists from the developed world to the exotic locations. Money is spent on advertising places of attraction, building airports, connecting roads to hotels and training tourist guides to speak various world's important languages. According to Mohd Hairi et al. (2007), catering to the dietary habits of the tourists is a factor that is given low priority. The reason for this is that tourists by their very nature are hardy individuals who are willing to put up with a lot of discomfort in order to explore new and exotic locations a million miles from home. However, not much effort is made in many of these exotic locations to ensure that tourists are fed with nourishing meals which are hygienically prepared. It can be debated that a massive influx of tourists into a country is dependent on our sensitivity to their dietary requirement. However, if these dietary requirements are not properly fulfilled, tourists who encounter this bad experience will transmit it globally which in turn will deter others from venturing into such 'unhealthy' territory in future. For this reason, the food and beverage industry has an important role to play in tourism promotion. Apart from addressing the need for daily sustenance, local cuisine can be touted as an attraction in itself (Long, 1998; Johns and Kivela, 2001; Scarpato, 2002; Kivela and Crofts, 2006; Mohd Hairi et. al, 2007). The food that a nation consumes reflects its culture, history and heritage. These are the aspects that the tourists crave to see and learn when they hop on the largest Jumbo available and head for their next package tour.

Besides accommodation and other tourism activities, food, beverage and food cultures are now considered one of the most important elements in the tourism industry. Tourists can either commend or censure their destinations, based on their 'gastronomic encounter' in that country. In other words, destinations, food, beverages and food related activities are considered integral components of a travel experience and therefore they can be considered as tourism products (Santich, 2003; Mohd Hairi et. al, 2007).

1.1 Relevant Studies of Gastronomic Tourism in South East Asia

Gastronomy has become the driving force behind the revival of tourism for destinations that are struggling for one reason or another. For example, Croatia faced a Herculean task in rebuilding its tourism industry after the civil war that broke up in Yugoslavia from 1990 to 1995. At present, an integral part of its rebuilding program strongly features local food, regional cuisines, wine making and food customs. Similar examples can be drawn from countries such as Vietnam and Kampuchea (formerly Cambodia). It seems that, when dining out at a destination, tourists in effect consume 'ingredients' that satisfy their feelings and enhance their cultural experiences (Fields, 2002). The above notion explicitly signifies that gastronomic products cannot be detached from tourism and this is in line with Santich's (2003) quotation below;

"Gastronomy is an art of living, the possession of skills and knowledge relating to food and drink and their preference, which enhances the pleasure and enjoyment of eating and drinking. Such fulfilments are the essence of gastronomic tourism, which is developing as a subset of cultural tourism where the experience of participating in a different culture is central especially the foods and drinks"

The connection between gastronomy and tourism has led other researchers to study their connection (Quan and Wang, 2004; Bessiere, 1998; Henderson, 2000; Kivela and Crotts, 2006). Kivela and Crotts (2006) investigated the way tourists perceive and experience gastronomy while visiting a destination. Their study in particular was to determine if gastronomic tourists represent a distinct market segment of an overall tourist market in Hong Kong. The results showed that many tourists from Taiwan, Japan and Singapore and other countries collectively agreed that cuisines and gastronomy are one of the prime tourist attractions in Hong Kong. The majority of these respondents reported that besides engaging in other tourism activities, they also took the opportunity to enjoy Hong Kong's gastronomic products. Another study on tourists' experiences of gastronomic products was undertaken by Herderson (2000). The central focus of his study was the reputation of the hawkers' food and tourism in Singapore. Besides upscale restaurants, hawkers' food was also the most popular type of cuisine among the international tourists. In addition, hawkers' food is also essential in promoting the economy of this country. This result is evident and in line with what was found later by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB, 2004). As reported, most of the Singaporeans agreed that food was one of the attractions that enticed visitors to Singapore. As a result, the Singapore Tourism Board has included Singaporean food and other related food activities as the main promotional strategy of their tourism marketing plan. Thus, in recent years (2005-2007) Singapore has been hosting many international annual food events to lure travellers to visit the country. The Singapore Food Festival and the World Gourmet Summit were among the top festivals that showcased Singaporean food and cultural lifestyle and gained international recognition (STB, 2004). In fact, Singapore is seriously making food and food culture as one of its major tourism products.

Karim (2006) found that the food image of a destination and its information sources play a significant role in attracting tourists to visit a particular country. In his study on the food image of France, Italy and Thailand, Karim (2006) identified that each destination has its own unique food image that characterizes the destination. From the result of the study he suggested that projecting a suitable food image of a destination and utilising an appropriate marketing strategy through the dissemination of information could help in developing gastronomic tourism particularly for a destination that is rich in culinary heritage.

1.2 Malaysian Gastronomic Products

Malaysia is one of the well known countries in South East Asia with vast gastronomic products that can be offered to international tourists (Mohd Hairi et al., 2007). A multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multilingual society comprises Malays, Chinese, Indians and other ethnic groups who live side by side have formed the unique gastronomic products with a combination of ingredients and taste ranging from mild to spicy and from plain to sweet (Hutton, 2000 and Mohd Hairi et al. 2007). The styles of cooking, the types of equipment used and the way of serving food and beverages are also fascinating. Besides food and beverages, the uniqueness of Malaysian food cultures (food-related activities and events) that represent each ethnic group have become part and parcel of the Malaysian gastronomic products (Mohd Hairi et al., 2007). Most of these gastronomic products are derived either from religious or cultural events such as Hari Raya (Malay), Chinese New Year (Chinese) and Deepavali (Indian). Other famous food-related activities that portray the varieties of the Malaysian food cultures are the fare offered in open air night markets popularly known locally as pasar malam and street stall hawkers (Syed Amir, 1991 and Mohd Hairi et al., 2007). In addition, by visiting these places tourists will get the opportunity to watch closer the uniqueness of the traditional skills practised by the hawkers in preparing food. Malaysia has a traditional eating manner which is inherited and practised from one

generation to another. The most popular method of eating is to pile the plate with rice and other side dishes heaped on top and tucked in heartily using the fingers of the right hand among the Malays and Indian whilst the Chinese eat their food by using chopsticks (Syed Amir, 1991; Hutton, 2000; Mohd Hairi et al., 2007).

Looking at the uniqueness of food, beverages and food cultures, Malaysia is simply a gastronomic heaven (MOTOUR, 2007). Western tourists make up the largest proportion of the total number of tourists visiting Malaysia annually. This great influx of western tourists into Malaysia might be due to their attraction to the Malaysian gastronomic products. Despite this attraction, there is no evidence or report being documented on their perception of the Malaysian gastronomic products. Thus, there is a need to undertake such a study. This study seeks to discover the western tourists perception of the Malaysian gastronomic products as it can be useful in promoting these products to be one of the main attractive categories in the Malaysian tourism industry.

2. Research Methodology

To measure the overall western tourists perception of the Malaysian gastronomic products, a self experienced report through a questionnaire survey was chosen as a means of data gathering. This approach was opted to ensure that the information obtained would be based upon their actual experiences in consuming Malaysian food and beverages and exposing themselves to the food cultures during their period of vacation in Malaysia.

2.1 Research Instruments

The instrument was developed by the researchers from a review of literature of previous studies. The questionnaire was divided into four sections. Section A consisted of respondent's demographic variables such as gender, marital status, age, level of education and country of origin. While in Section B the travel patterns of the western tourists were identified. Section C measured the western tourists perception of the Malaysian gastronomic products (food, beverages and food cultures) using questions based on a 5 point Likert scale (5= Strongly Agree, 4= Agree, 3= Neither, 2= Disagree, 1= Strongly Disagree). In order to validate the quantitative results, two open-ended questions were probed in Section D. In ensuring the reliability and validity of the instrument developed, a pilot study has been conducted using 30 randomly selected western tourists at a few popular places around Kuala Lumpur namely on the busy streets of Jalan Bukit Bintang, Central Market, Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre (KLCC), and Midvalley Shopping Mall. After running a statistical reliability test (Cronbach's alpha), it was found that Section C of the instrument had a reliability of 0.7.

2.2 The Sample and Data Collection Process

The sample population collected for this study consisted of western tourists. These western tourists were selected due to their different food characteristics. The western food is totally different from most of the Asian and the Middle East cuisines. Their food normally consists of salad, beef, chicken, potatoes and others with a mild taste and low salt content as compared to most of the Asian and the Middle East food which is a lot more pungent and spicy in taste (Kittler and Sucher, 2004). In addition, Asian and the Middle East food share similar characteristics which make the food tastes familiar to the palate of the tourists who come from these regions (Kittler and Sucher, 2004). Therefore, tourists from Asia and the Middle East were not selected for this study because it will not give significant or meaningful results on how they perceive Malaysian gastronomic products. In the context of this study, western tourists are referred to those who come from the continent of Europe, America, Oceania and other western countries. In short they are also known as Caucasians (Painter, 2003; Baum, 2006).

The data were collected at KLIA as these tourists were considered to have tasted the local food and beverages or experienced other related food activities during their vacation in Malaysia before they left for their home countries. In other words, it could be argued the western tourists who were at the airport before their departure would have fully experienced the Malaysian gastronomic products. Thus, their responses would be based on their true experiences of their vacation.

Owing to the large number of western tourists visiting Malaysia, it would be difficult for a researcher to do a survey on all of them. As noted by Salkind (2003), in research investigations which involve several hundreds and even thousands of elements, it would be practically impossible to collect data from, or test or examine every element. He suggested that when the elements are large in number, it is better to study a sample rather than the entire population because this would lead to fewer errors in data collection and more reliable results. Based on this argument, the unrestricted or simple random sampling would be the most appropriate approach for the data collection process. Furthermore, Bryman and Cramer (1999) noted that simple random sampling, as its name implies is the process where every element in the population has a known and equal chance of being selected as a subject. In addition, this sampling design also offers the most generalizability and has the least bias compared to the other sampling methods (Sekaran, 2000; Holmes, Dahan and Ashari, 2005). The selection of respondents during the survey process was tightly controlled by asking the western tourists two screening questions. The first question was: "Where are you from?" If the tourists said that their country of origin was one of the stated western regions, the researcher would proceed to the

second question: "Have you consumed Malaysian food and beverages and also experienced the food related cultures during your vacation?" If the western tourists said "Yes", the questionnaires were given to them to get their responses on their experience with the Malaysian gastronomic products.

With regard to the sufficient number of respondents for this study, Roscoe (1975) noted that sample sizes larger than 30 and smaller than 500 are appropriate for most research. Owing to the time and budget constraints, the researchers could only afford to collect the data within fifteen to twenty days. Considering all these limitations, the questionnaires were successfully administered among the western tourists in November 2007 at KLIA. A total of 311 responses were obtained and subsequently coded and keyed-in using the SPSS version 14.0.

3. Analyses and Results

3.1 Characteristics of the Sample

The following tables present the overall dimensions of the respondents' profiles based on each independent variable used in the survey such as gender, age, and country of origin, marital status, occupation and level of education. In addition, questions such as length of stay, main purpose of visiting, frequency of visiting and type of food outlet western tourists dine at often during their holiday are also reported on.

Table 1. The number and percentage (%) of overall respondents reported by gender, marital status, age, level of education, occupation and country of origin

VARIABLES	n	%
Gender		
Male	169	54.3
Female	142	45.7
TOTAL	311	100
Marital Status		
Single	159	51.1
Married	152	48.9
TOTAL	311	100
Age		
18 – 29 years	61	19.6
30 – 39 years	93	29.9
40 – 49 years	80	25.7
50 – 59 years	49	15.8
60 years and above	28	9
TOTAL	311	100
Level of Education		
High School	37	11.9
Certificate/Diploma	56	18
Bachelor Degree	107	34.4
Master Degree	98	31.5
PhD	13	4.2
TOTAL	311	100
Occupation		
Student	36	11.6
Administrative/Clerk	60	19.3
Professional	113	36.3
Businessman	43	13.8
Retiree	32	10.3
Housewife	27	8.7

TOTAL	311	100
Country of Origin		
Australasia	72	23.2
North America	40	12.9
Europe	187	60.1
South Africa	12	3.9
TOTAL	311	100

As can be seen from Table 1, the sample comprises 54.3 % (n = 169) male respondents and 45.7 % (n = 142) female respondents. This is not surprising as most studies have proven that the propensity of travelling abroad among the male westerners is higher than the female westerners (Botterill and Crompton, 1996; Jianakoplos and Bernasek, 1998; Sundén and Surette, 1998; Benjamin, Choi and Strickland, 2006). With regard to marital status, 48.9 % (n = 152) of the respondents were married while 51.1 % (n = 159) were single. From the researchers' observation, most of the married respondents were accompanied by their spouses. It was also found that although some proportions of the respondents were single, they were actually with their friends. This indicates that the majority of the western tourists prefer to travel with their companions or groups as this would probably provide more security during the vacation.

The results also revealed that the majority of respondents were between 30 to 39 years old who made up 29.9 % of the total sample (n = 93) followed by 25.7 % (n = 80) of respondents who were between 40 to 49 years of age. The highest percentage of western tourists who responded to the survey were between 30 to 59 years old. This represents 71.4 % of the total respondents. It could be said from the result that most of the western tourists who visited Malaysia between 30 to 59 years old. This group is believed to have a higher interest in travelling and exploring new things. Therefore, this is the reason that encourages them to travel frequently as compared to the older age groups (60 years and above).

The results also indicated that 11.9 % (n = 37) of the respondents had high school qualifications, 18 % (n = 56) had certificates and diplomas, 34.4 % (n = 107) held Bachelor's degrees, 31.5 % (n = 98) possessed Master's degrees and 4.2 % (n = 13) were PhD holders. These results showed that there was a significant relationship between the level of education and employment. In the real term, an individual with a higher level of education is more successful in securing a higher job position and is therefore financially stable as compared to those with low educational levels (Shenoy, 2005). This is evident as the highest proportion of the western tourists who visited Malaysia were among the professionals (36.3 %, n = 113) compared to administrators (19.3 %, n = 60), businessmen (13.8 %, n = 43), students (11.6 %, n = 36), retirees (10.3 %, n = 32) and housewives (8.7 %, n = 27). These results supported previous studies by Yuan and McDonald, (1990), Basala and Klenosky (2001) and Shenoy (2003) which noted that the pattern and frequencies of travelling are higher among those with high disposable income compared to the other groups. It is interesting to note that the slightly higher students' response to this study was due to their universities semester break during that period.

It was predicted that when the questionnaire was developed earlier, the majority of the respondents were expected to come from the European continent as it consists of many countries with a large total number of population in the world. Moreover, they often travel between September and January every year due to the winter season in some of the western countries (MOTOUR, 2007). This holds true as the highest percentage of the western tourists in this study were from European continent which accounted for 60.1 % (n = 187) as opposed to 23.2 % (n = 72) from the Australasian region and 12.9 % (n = 40) from North America. The smallest proportion of western tourists (3.9 %) was from South Africa and the reason for this is that Malaysia is considered as a new and unfamiliar destination for them (MOTOUR, 2007).

Looking at the results of the travelling pattern of the western tourists who visited Malaysia, it was found that the majority of the western tourists travelled with their friends and spouses. According to Yuan and McDonald (1990), the reason for tourists who travel with their friends, family or spouses is to have a holiday. This notion is supported in the subsequent analysis whereby 63.3 % (n = 197) of the respondents travelled for the purpose of having a holiday against 13.8 % (n = 43) for business purposes, 6.4 % (n = 20) shopping, 9.6 % (n = 30) visiting friends and 5.5 % (n = 17) for other purposes. It is interesting to note that 1.3 % of the respondents who visited Malaysia were for the purpose of exploring the food and culture. These results are tabulated and shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The number and percentage (%) of overall respondents reported by purpose of visiting and length of stay

VARIABLES	n	%
Purpose of Visiting		
Holiday	197	63.3
Business	43	13.8
Visiting Friends	30	9.6
Shopping	20	6.4
Food and Culture	4	1.3
Others	17	5.5
TOTAL	311	100
Length of Stay		
3 nights and below	46	14.8
4-6 nights	33	10.6
7-9 nights	40	12.9
More than 10 nights	192	61.7
TOTAL	311	100
Frequency of Visit		
First Time	167	53.7
Second Time	72	23.2
Third Time	34	10.9
More Than three Times	38	12.2
TOTAL	311	100
Restaurant or Food Outlet Dined Often		
Hotel Restaurant/ Coffee House	83	26.7
Fast-food	22	7.1
Local Ethnic Restaurant	97	31.2
Local Food Court	45	14.5
Street Stall (Hawkers)	53	17.0
Friend or Relative's House	11	3.5
TOTAL	311	100

As the majority of western tourists visited Malaysia for the purpose of having a holiday, it is not surprising to see that these respondents reported that their average length of stay was more than 10 nights (61.7 %, n = 192) compared to 10.6 % respondents (n = 33) who stayed between 4 to 6 nights. This is followed by 12.9 % (n = 40) who stayed between 7 to 9 nights and 14.8 % (n = 46) who stayed less than 3 nights. It could be summed up from the finding that the average length of stay among the western tourists in Malaysia is 6 nights. This is in line with Ibrahim (2007) who revealed that the average length of stay of the Arab tourists who visited Malaysia was 6 nights. According to the Ministry of Tourism (2007), besides the Arab tourists, western tourists are also one of the important target markets for the Malaysian tourism industry because of their high currency exchange rate and spending power. Therefore, their prolong length of stay in Malaysia would eventually constitute a source of income for the country. It is also interesting to note that those who stayed less than 3 nights were perhaps businessmen.

On the frequency of visit, 53.7 % (n = 167) visited Malaysia for the first time, followed by 23.2 % (n = 72) visited Malaysia for the second time and 12.2 % (n = 34) visited this country for more than three times. The reason for the higher percentage of those western tourists who visited Malaysia for the first time was probably due to the extensive promotion of the Visit Malaysia Year 2007 campaign by the Malaysian tourism industry. On the other hand, those who visited this country more than three times were most likely to be the businessmen.

The next section discusses the analyses on the western tourists perception of the Malaysian gastronomic products.

3.2 Analyses on the Western Tourists Perception of the Malaysian Gastronomic Products

The western tourists perception of the Malaysian gastronomic products was examined using mean scores. The mean scores of the respondents' perception are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The mean scores of respondents' perception of Malaysian gastronomic products

Item No.	ITEMS	n	Mean (M)	S.D
1.	Malaysia offers great choices of food and beverages	311	4.45	.684
2.	Most of the Malaysian food and beverages are freshly prepared	311	3.74	.991
3.	Most of the Malaysian food and beverages are well accepted	311	3.90	.838
4.	Despite exploring the country, my intention is also to learn the Malaysian food, beverages and food cultures	311	4.00	.952
5.	The identity of each of Malaysian ethnic groups can be seen through their food and beverages	311	4.06	.813
6.	Malaysia also offers a great kind of snack food (crackers, preserved foods)	311	3.75	.972
7.	The taste of most Malaysian snacks is acceptable	311	3.83	.859
8.	Some of the Malaysian food and beverages are recognized internationally	311	3.24	.971
9.	Most of the Malaysian snacks are as good as imported ones	311	3.19	.989
10.	The taste of local canned beverages is acceptable as the imported ones	311	3.03	1.134
11.	The quality of Malaysian canned beverages is as good as freshly prepared	311	2.82	.987
12.	Most of Malaysian beverages look attractive	311	3.60	1.014
13.	Most of the Malaysian food is salty	311	2.29	1.106
14.	Most of the Malaysian food is good in taste	311	4.15	.776
15.	Most of the Malaysian food is served hot	311	3.81	1.118
16.	The aroma of the Malaysian food is adorable	311	3.92	.926
17.	Most of the Malaysian food contains too much carbohydrate	311	2.23	1.266
18.	Most of the Malaysian food is too spicy	311	4.02	1.213
19.	Most of the Malaysian food uses too much chili paste	311	4.11	1.228
20.	Most of the Malaysian main dishes are oily	311	3.60	1.200
21.	Most of the Malaysian delicacies and beverages are too sweet	311	4.01	.989
22.	Malaysian food culture practice is unique	311	3.95	1.063
23.	Malaysian food culture has its own identity as other Asian countries	311	3.77	.947
24.	The way most Malaysian food and beverages are prepared attracts me	311	4.01	.919
25.	Some of the Malaysian cooking styles are attractive	311	4.07	.666
26.	The use of traditional equipment in preparing some of the Malaysian food truly portrays a Malaysian culture	311	3.69	.846
27.	Malaysia is rich in traditional eating manners	311	3.90	.835
28.	Different styles of different ethnic groups' eating manners represent the uniqueness of Malaysian food culture	311	3.95	.898
29.	Food culture activities such as night markets, bazaars and food events and festivals are one of the main attractions of Malaysian food culture	311	3.94	.914
30.	Hawkers stall and open food court concept are another unique Malaysian food culture	311	3.89	.999

The mean scores above show that the majority of respondents perceived that Malaysia offers great choices of food and beverages. This can clearly be seen from a greater level of agreement ($M= 4.45$, item 1) given to this item. The respondents also agreed that most of the Malaysian food and beverages are freshly prepared ($M= 3.71$, item 2) and the Malaysian food and beverages are well accepted by them ($M=3.90$, item 3). They also reported that besides exploring the country, their intention was to learn about Malaysian food, beverages and food cultures ($M= 4.00$, item 4) and they agreed that the identity of each of the Malaysian ethnic groups can be seen through their food and beverages ($M=4.06$, item 5). A similar view was also given to the local snack food and canned beverages. The respondents believed that Malaysia offers a great kind of snack food ($M= 3.75$, item 6) and the taste of these snacks is mostly acceptable ($M= 3.75$, item 7). These results show that Malaysia is rich in the varieties of food, snacks, beverages and food culture practice due to the multiracial society which comprises Malays, Chinese and Indians. Therefore, the western tourists have more choices of food and beverages while visiting Malaysia.

However, despite this perception, the respondents were still not really sure that some of the Malaysian food and beverages are internationally recognized ($M= 3.24$, item 8). Similar notion was given to whether the local snacks ($M= 3.19$, item 9) and canned beverages ($M= 3.06$, item 10) are as good as the imported ones. In addition, they were also not sure that the quality of the canned beverages is as good as the freshly prepared ones ($M= 2.82$, item 11). However, a few of them agreed that some of the local beverages do look attractive ($M= 3.60$, item 12). The western tourists might be uncertain in rating the Malaysian gastronomic products due to their unfamiliarity with some of the Malaysian food, snacks, beverages and canned beverages. These results present the whole scenario of Malaysian food and beverages whereby various kinds of food and beverages are being offered but only a few are internationally recognized.

In an effort to identify the western tourists perception on the general characteristics of Malaysian food and beverages, 10 items were probed in the instrument. The results showed that the respondents slightly disagreed with the statement that most of Malaysian food is too salty ($M= 2.29$, item 13). With that view they perceived most of the Malaysian food is tasty ($M= 4.15$, item 14), the food is being served hot ($M= 3.81$, item 15) with adorable aromas ($M= 3.92$, item 16) and they believed the food does not contain much carbohydrate ($M= 2.23$, item 17). Nevertheless, most of them agreed that Malaysian food is too spicy ($M= 4.02$, item 18). This notion is supported whereby most of the tourists agreed on the substantial amount of chilli paste used in most of the Malaysian food ($M= 4.11$, item 19). Similar view was given to the use of cooking oil especially in the main dishes preparation ($M= 3.68$, item 20). In fact, the respondents believed that most of the local delicacies and beverages are too sweet ($M= 4.01$, item 21). All these points indicated that the majority of western tourists probably had preconceived ideas about the characteristics of Malaysian food and beverages through the mass media (books, magazines, newspapers and brochures) and the internet before visiting this country or they had already experienced some of the food while on vacation.

Hegarty and O'Mahony (1999) noted that besides consuming the local food and beverages, tourists are indirectly experiencing the local food culture practice of the country visited. Food culture practice is related to food preparation, cooking styles, cooking utensils used and eating manners. In addition, they argued that tourists will also experience other related food culture activities such as food festivals and events, religious festivals and food kiosks or street stalls during their vacation. In line with this notion, the analyses on the western tourists perception of Malaysian food cultures revealed that the majority of the respondents perceived Malaysia has a very unique food culture ($M= 3.95$, item 22) with exquisite identity ($M= 3.77$, item 23). With this perception, it is not surprising that a substantial number of respondents agreed that some of the Malaysian cooking styles are attractive ($M= 4.07$, item 24) and they were attracted by the way Malaysian food and beverages are prepared ($M= 4.01$, item 25). In addition, they perceived that the use of traditional cooking equipment in preparing some of the food truly portrays a Malaysian culture ($M= 3.69$, item 26)

Besides the traditional cooking styles and cooking equipment used, the respondents seemed to agree that Malaysia has its traditional eating manners ($M= 3.90$, item 27) and they believed that the different styles of eating manners by different ethnics contribute to the uniqueness of its food culture ($M= 3.95$, item 28). In actual fact, this perception can be confirmed, as the major ethnics in this country are practising different eating styles. For instance, the traditional Malays and Indians use their right hand fingers when eating while the Chinese use the chopsticks. Therefore, it can be argued that the western tourists probably have seen those eating styles or experienced it themselves during their vacation.

Another interesting result worth highlighting is related to food related activities such as night markets, bazaars, food events and festivals. The results revealed that the respondents somewhat agreed that such mentioned activities are one of the main attractions of the Malaysian food culture. This is proven by the mean score ($M= 3.94$, item 29) given to this item. They also considered that the street stall hawkers and open food court concepts as part of the Malaysian food culture activities ($M= 3.89$, item 30). Again, this result indicated that the western tourists had the chance of experiencing those activities or had seen them.

Thus, it can be seen that some of the notable findings with regard to the general western tourists perception of the Malaysian gastronomic products are obtained in the analyses.

3.3 Open-ended Responses

Two open-ended questions were probed to corroborate the differences and similarities of all the findings attained in the quantitative section analysis. The first question asked the respondents of 'In general, how do you perceive Malaysian food and beverages?' The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Number of responses to the item 'In general, how do you perceive Malaysian food and beverages?'

No.	VARIABLES	n	%
1.	Cheap and reasonable price	34	10.9
2.	Hot and spicy	57	18.3
3.	Nice and tasty	71	22.8
4.	Variety of food and beverages	98	31.5
5.	Freshly prepared and healthy	51	16.4

Overall, 31.5 % or 98 respondents perceived that Malaysia has a wide assortment of food and beverages whilst 16.4 % or 51 respondents admitted that Malaysian food and beverages are freshly prepared and healthy. 71 respondents (22 %) viewed that Malaysian food and beverages are nice and tasty. These answers correspond and support the high mean score given by the respondents to similar items in the quantitative section. In addition, 34 respondents or 10.9 % stated that the price of the local food and beverages are cheap and affordable. Some respondents' answers are as follows:

** Foods are tasty and freshly prepared. The price is cheap and I love it.*

** Very good food, good taste and cheap*

** I enjoyed the Malaysian food so much and it is sold everywhere with reasonable price*

The above answers hold true as the current exchange rate of the Malaysian Ringgit is lower compared to other western countries. Therefore, the spending powers on the food and other related tourism activities among the western tourists are considerably higher. However, despite such perceptions 18.3 % or 57 respondents reported that Malaysian food is hot and spicy. This can clearly be seen with some of the comments given by them:

** Different from other country, variety of choices unfortunately most of them are too hot.*

** The taste of local food is good but too spicy for me.*

** Good taste but generally too spicy. I am not used to hot and spicy food.*

** I like Malaysian food but sometimes it too hot and spicy.*

These statements uphold the argument that the western tourists did enjoy some of the Malaysian food except that they were slightly displeased with the hot and spicy food. This is probably due to the nature of their taste buds which are used to mild food. Again, the answers correspond and support well with the high mean score given to similar items found in the quantitative section.

The second open-ended question identified respondents' opinion on the Malaysian food, beverages and food cultures as part of their tourism experience. The answers received were categorized into three groups (Table 5).

Table 5. Number of responses to the item 'Overall, do you think that Malaysian food, beverages and food cultures are part of your tourism experience?'

No.	VARIABLES	n	%
1.	Yes, can be part of tourism products	224	72.0
2.	No	50	16.1
3.	Not much or unsure	37	11.9

The above responses show that, it is very difficult to deny that the western tourists rejected Malaysian food, beverages and food cultures or gastronomic products as part of their tourism experience. This is evident as 72 % or 224 respondents answered 'Yes' to this question. This is further supported by a small proportion of respondents who opposed or who were not sure of the idea. The higher percentage of western tourists who affirmed that Malaysian gastronomic products were part of their tourism experience can be inferred as genuine and taken as valid.

4. Recommendations and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that the majority of the western tourists positively perceived that besides other tourism activities and products, Malaysia offers a great selection of food, beverages and food culture (gastronomic products) to attract the tourists. With this perception, it is also clearly shown that these products can be used in addition to other tourism products as catalyst to boost the local economy. In line with this statement, those individuals (business operators), organizations (travel agencies and non-government organizations) and government authorities (Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage, Ministry of Agricultural and Ministry of Rural Development) who are closely associated with the tourism industry therefore should not ignore this good sign but take a proactive action in promoting these gastronomic products to the tourists because these products can be the 'pulling-factors' of visiting Malaysia.

As for the food operators (restaurants, hawker stalls or food courts) particularly those who operate their business at frequently visited areas by the international tourists should therefore take this opportunity to promote and provide more varieties of local ethnic food and beverages which are of good quality, clean and decently presented. In addition, as the western tourists perceive that the taste of local food and beverages are too spicy and sweet, food operators should consider these aspects when preparing these products.

Travel agencies and other tour organizers should offer more tour packages specifically focusing on food and food culture, indigenous cuisines, dining out, cooking and shopping for food at local markets. This is in line with Kivela and Crofts (2006) who noted that many international tour agencies and tour organizers around the world have included the gastronomic products as part of their tour itineraries and consequently this has successfully attracted more international tourists to participate in those activities. This approach has been proven to be successful in marketing and promoting the exquisiteness of the local gastronomic products.

In addition, the Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Culture, Art and Heritage and Ministry of Agricultural should play a significant role in promoting this country internationally as they are the government authorities who are responsible in this matter. Thus, the Ministry of Tourism through the Malaysian Tourism Promotional Board should now focus on offering gastronomic products to the tourists whereby previously it had been concentrating on the beautiful islands, exquisite flora and fauna and enchanting traditional culture. The government should also aspire to be a 'gastronomic paradise' and this is in line with the statement made by the previous Director General of Tourism Malaysia:

"Food has become an important tourism product for our country as it enriches the experience of the visiting tourist. We are certainly ready to entice travellers to our shores and offer them a flavour of Malaysia Truly Asia. I commend the organiser for promoting Malaysia as a food paradise, in line with the Malaysian Government's aspirations"

(YB, Dato' Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor, 2007)

In order to realize this aspiration, several promotional strategies are presently undertaken. The government through the Economy Planning Unit (EPU) introduced a project called 'Malaysian Kitchen' in 2006 to increase the number of Malaysian restaurants all over the globe to popularize the Malaysian gastronomic products internationally. Besides 'Malaysian Kitchen', there are many other promotional activities that have been launched namely creative cooking tours, food related events (Open houses and other Malaysian festivals), Malaysia International Gourmet Festival and Halal Hub program in an effort of boosting the Malaysian gastronomic products locally and internationally (MOTOUR, 2007). From such promotional ventures, they do not only generate foreign income through the sales of food overseas but also popularize the Malaysian gastronomic products among the potential international tourists. The government or the responsible authorities should continuously organize these events perhaps on a bigger scale as they can be used as a platform to introduce Malaysia as a paradise for epicureans.

As a conclusion, the collaboration and cooperation of food operators, travel agencies and government related authorities and other stakeholders are therefore crucial or should be further strengthened if the 'total tourism experience' among the international tourists in this country is to be achieved. The wonderful tourism products in this country would be left wasted if such commonality of approach is not developed.

5. Limitations

Although the results highlighted a range of interesting and significantly meaningful findings, there were also several limitations encountered during the research process. Firstly, the majority of respondents who participated in this study were the western tourists who were waiting for the international flight departure to their countries. However, little participation was obtained from the transit passengers because they showed no interest to participate in the survey. This is due to the fact that transit passengers were in a rush and they were actually waiting in the 'waiting lounge' which was too costly for the researchers to engage the transit airport security for assistance. It would be more beneficial for the study if the transit passengers could participate in the survey. Therefore, if there are enough resources, replication and further research should also be employed in the waiting lounge area. The second limitation is related to the location of data collection. Again, due to the time and budget constraints, KLIA was only chosen for

collecting the information from the western tourists. Hence, it could be said that more colourful insights of the findings could be obtained if other airports such as Penang, Langkawi, Kuching and Kota Kinabalu are being included as a survey location. Indeed, there is a need to expand this present study by looking at a broader scope especially on the other minority ethnic groups' gastronomic products namely Eurasians, Peranakans (Babas and Nyonyas) and those tribes in the Borneo region (Sabah and Sarawak). Such work will give a thorough picture and understanding on tourists perception of the Malaysian gastronomic products. In addition, to examine whether this perception holds true, a study on the western tourists' level of consumption of the Malaysian food, beverages and food culture needs to be conducted in the future.

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