

INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS' ACCEPTANCE OF MALAYSIAN HERITAGE FOOD CHOICES

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is not only known as a multi-cultural country, but it is also known for its specialized heritage where tourists can find varied food from different cultures in Malaysia. Given that Malaysia is home to several ethnic groups stemming from roots in the colonial period in which hundreds and thousands of immigrants who migrated to what was Malaya before, in search of an honest living in a prosperous country. Food heritage is a term that encompasses the origin of plants and animals, and their dispersal at sites where people first cultivated domesticated plants and animals, and the first places where people first treated, prepared, sold and ate that food. This study was conducted to investigate the acceptance of international tourists towards Malaysian heritage food choices from the different ethnicities of Malay, Chinese and Indian, who represent the largest ethnic groups in Malaysia. Comparing these results is useful because it can provide an initial picture of tourist acceptance. The results of the study may be used to promote the choices of heritage food as an addition to other tourism products as a catalyst to generate business and stimulate the local economy.

Keywords: Acceptance, heritage food, choices, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board has produced a promotional plan that emphasizes efforts to promote local food as part of the tourism experience. The Board has collaborated with MATRADE (Malaysia External Trade Development) and, organized a joint campaign with special annual events to promote Malaysian food as one of the nation's attractions. MATRADE serves as a platform to help introduce Malaysian food and local commodities internationally. Also, the Malaysian Heritage Division (DHM) released a list of 100 Malaysian Heritage Foods in December 2009 before the list was expanded to 151 in October 2013. Various activities and promotions have been carried out continuously to increase the number of tourists in the country and determine any good opportunity that could be marketed and promoted.

Food and tourism are increasingly being combined and has become a trend lately. Food has become a major component since it is a symbol of culture and place itself. Traditional food is closely associated with food heritage and has played a significant role in the life of society.

The awareness of the importance of food as a heritage component in tourism has been steadily growing. Food heritage is associated with classical and traditional foods that are continuously practiced by all generations without major alteration of the original flavors. Heritage foods serve as symbols of cultural identity, status and communication. It can be used to attract tourists to a destination because dining is not only fun but also considered a cultural activity. The food heritage has become an important part in the life of any society because it can be one of the attractions as a new product for tourist activities. Food is one of the most influential elements in the tourism sector that acts as a sense of place attraction for travelers (Bessiere, 1998; Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Ryu & Jang, 2006; Seo, Kim, Oh, & Yun, 2013) who seeks for unusual or extraordinary food experience and different culture that might not acquire at their home countries.

Thus, the main motivations for people to travel are to experience and taste food and drink that can provide a lasting memory in their lifetime (Wolf, 2002). According to Wolf, in general, travelers spend more money when they are away from home. Tourists usually get information from the website such as TripAdvisor, Facebook, Instagram or other sources of social media which would list a wide variety of activities which tourists can indulge in at their destination holiday locations. Hoffman and Novak (2012) reported internet use had become very common and the popularity of social media (e.g, Facebook, Youtube and, Twitter) has been growing over time, thus firms view social media as an important communication tool for their marketing and strategic decisions to enhance customers' engagement.

Tourists who travel from one place to another place have their reasons for traveling. Tourists would look for a unique and different experience during their trip (Richards, 2002). Information is needed for entrepreneurs or the relevant authorities to establish the right setting or choices in order to promote traditional food, introduce life of the local population, develop a proper appropriate image for food and culture as a tourist destination and encourage popularity of traditional food to foreign tourists while maintaining traditional foods for the next generation.

Exciting restaurants or establishing a food trail are examples of activities that could be part of the aforementioned promotion package. Tourists who have experienced the food could be inclined to recommend places to the website reader. Penang Tourism had also developed its food trail called "Penang Food Trail – Georgetown and Northern region", which can be downloaded from the official Penang Tourism website.

This study seeks to determine the international tourist acceptance of Malaysian Heritage food choices as it can be useful in promoting these products as one of the main attractive categories in the Malaysian tourism industry. This research is conducted specifically Georgetown Penang because it is voted as Malaysia's newest UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Penang is one of the states located in the northern region of Malaysia. It has a reputation of being a "Food Paradise" in the region as it offers diverse and exotic mix from the various ethnic and cultural communities such as the Malay, Chinese and Indian that reflect the multicultural mix of the city. It is popular among locals and tourists and was recognized as having the "Best Street Food" in Asia by Time magazine in 2004. In 2013, Penang was also ranked by CNN Travel as one of the region's top ten gastronomic cities. Penang was also voted by Lonely Planet as the leading culinary destination in 2014. International tourists who come to Penang often want to taste different foods that represent the three ethnicities but not all of those foods are acceptable to their palate because the taste, cooking method, ingredients and taste of the food

is unfamiliar to their taste buds. This creates an opportunity to determine whether international tourists can accept food choices that offered authentically of true heritage food of Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many factors like social, cultural, political and economic aspects influenced the information of the national food identity.

Heritage Food

Malaysia is very rich in culture and nature. With its diverse natural culture and landscapes, it has attracted many tourists to come to Malaysia. Malaysia is one of the well-known countries in South East Asia of having vast gastronomy products (food, beverage and food culture) that can be offered to international tourists (Jalis 2007). Tourists come to Malaysia not only for cultural but more importantly, the diverse society of Malaysia which comprises three main ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese and Indians offers an eclectic background in cultural experiences. With respect to the uniqueness of food, beverages and food crops, the government, through the Ministry of Tourism and other related agencies, are beginning to spend a lot of money promoting this brand of tourism, especially in the Western countries, which make up the largest part of the total tourist arrival annually (MOTOUR, 2007).

Recent research by Mohamad, Omar, and Mohamed (2015) had studied about aspects of holiday satisfaction in Penang for both international and domestic tourists. Their study concluded that four aspects: accessibility, accommodation, tourist amenities, and food can affect tourists' satisfaction in Penang. The inclusion of food reflects it's important in the overall image of Penang as a popular tourist destination in Malaysia. Since food was one of the aspects that can affect the traveling experience, it is crucial for the destination management organizations to constantly make effort to improve and enhance dining experiences in Penang. Another past study had looked into the acceptance and perception specifically from western tourists towards the local food (Jalis, Zahari and Othman, 2009) conducted in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. The study revealed that the majority of western tourists perceived that Malaysia offered great choices of tasty and freshly prepared food, snacks and beverages. They perceived that Malaysia owned a unique and exquisite identity in food culture. Besides, the findings also demonstrated that the local gastronomic products can be a catalyst for boosting the local economy.

This is being observed in European countries such as France and Italy, famous for having their authentic food culture of pizza and pasta sensations (Henderson, 2009). Tourists are usually involved in an aggressive search for tasting new sensation of food found to be exciting and fun for their vacation. Indeed, tourists also spend almost half of their expenditure on food and drinks while having their splendid and pleasant holiday. Mak, Lumbers, & Eves (2012) stated that the proportion of tourists' allocation of food is high, which contributed to 30% of tourism revenues. The rich cultural value creates a sense of 'belongingness' and helps to enhance people's pride that in turn could lead to their willingness to conserve and preserve their cultural food heritage. Meanwhile, the historical facts provide knowledge of the past. These incidences have opened the Malaysians' eyes, particularly the government, on the importance of having own cultural identity, especially in traditional cuisine (Lim, 2012). Matta (2013) cited Bessiere(1998) and Tibere (2013) defined food heritage as a set of material and immaterial elements of food cultures, that had been considered as shared legacy or common good. According to Ramli, Zahari, Ishak, and Sharif (2013), food heritage has been classified broadly

by several researchers on the topics of food heritage which are related to agricultural place and history, origin of the food products (i.e. breed fruits, vegetables and livestock-related to regional climate and suitability) and in terms of food production of local produce.

Food heritage has been reflected in environmental history, belief, ideology, and food technology of society in an era. Wahid, Mohamed, and Sirat (2009) stated that former Commissioner of Heritage, Prof. Datuk Zuraina Majid categorized heritage foods into two categories. The first category refers to synonymous or common foods that are part of our lives, whereas the second consists of foods that face extinction, in other words, they were once part of our culture but are slowly dying out. Tibere and Aloysius (2013) concurred that food heritage with rich cultural value and historical insights belong to the societies, which can be traced in their recipe used and technique of cooking.

METHODOLOGY

Sample selection

The information needed for this study will be collected from international tourists in Georgetown Penang area using a self-completed questionnaire survey. This approach will obtain information based on the actual experiences of international tourists towards Malaysian heritage food consumption during their stay in Penang. Assuring the reliability and validity of the developed instrument, a pilot study will be conducted of selected tourists at the Unesco World Heritage area in Georgetown, Penang.

Instrument and data collection

The questionnaire version that is used in the relevant section of the questionnaire was developed by Steptoe (1995) and also utilized in previous research in Greece related to ethnocentric beliefs and country of origin effect (Chrysohoidia,2007). The questionnaire will be divided into five sections. Section A includes the demographic variables of tourists (gender, marital status, age, education level and country of origin) and the travel pattern (visit purpose). Section B measured the general acceptance of international tourists toward heritage food choices in Penang. Articles related to the consumption pattern of tourists on Malaysian foods and beverages will be composed in Section C. Section D is set to determine the tourists' experience in food choices in Malaysia. It should be noted that all questions used in Sections B, C and D are based on a 5-point Likert scale (5 = Strongly agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly disagree).

Data analysis

The results obtained from the respondents will then be coded and entered in the SPSS 21.0 version.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY

The adaptation of food from various ethnic groups in multicultural/ethnic nation will lead to a common acceptable cuisine that could be called national food identity Cozzi, A. (2005), Fox, N. J., & Ward, K. J. (2008). Food influences social demography, economy, education and the life of the community which strengthens integrative force, solidarity and sociality and alliances between communities (Suhaimi, Salehuddin, and Zahari, 2014). Trying new and tantalizing food is considered an enjoyable activity for tourists and most tourists wish to experience non-

threatening, exotic experiences. Consistent with this, this study witnessed how the international tourist acceptance of Malaysian food heritage choices is gradually evolving through cross-culture processes. Adaptation processes provide an important role in the food provider to understand and learn about other food and beverages.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the choices of Malaysian heritage food derived from different ethnicities such as Malay, Chinese, Indian and other minority groups, have great relevance to society and culture and play a major role in the tourism sector and the construction of the economy as a whole. Having various choices and unique food like nasi lemak, char koay teow, roti canai, asam laksa, ais kacang and tose and other heritage traditional food are some of the interesting examples of Malaysian heritage food that can be promoted. The result is very important for restaurateurs and academicians to consider, as well as local food producers and food exporters when introducing the Malaysian food heritage to the public. As a starting point for a wider study, this research is an important attribute that can be extended research into quantitative studies to promote food heritage as part of Malaysian culture. Identifying choices result in ideas for restaurants to explore the potential demand of tourists for the new or modified choices of their foods. Also, restaurateurs should promote Malaysian heritage food for tourists and educate them on food heritage.

Another subject to take into consideration is the variety and availability of information on food choices in Penang. It is very important to have correct and adequate information to promote heritage food and create awareness among the tourists. Whilst they might have already information available on the internet or social media, the authority must be alert of the type and content of this information.

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