

## Unleashing Gastronomy Potential for Tourism Product Diversification in Labuan Bajo Manggarai Barat

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### Abstract

This study explores how local gastronomy can diversify tourism products in Labuan Bajo, Manggarai Barat, a destination dominated by nature-based attractions. Using a qualitative case study, data were collected from 25 informants (local chefs, entrepreneurs, operators, community leaders, government) through 15 in-depth interviews and 2 focus group discussions, complemented by participant observation. Thematic analysis identified four key themes: (1) authenticity and cultural identity embedded in local dishes, (2) stakeholder collaboration gaps, (3) limited culinary promotion and infrastructure, and (4) emerging grassroots innovations. Findings show that while tourists value unique dishes such as jagung titi and se'i, their integration into tourism remains fragmented; collaborative events and culinary SMEs demonstrate potential models for scaling. The novelty of this study lies in mapping stakeholder collaboration mechanisms and proposing a staged experience model (education, taste exploration, cultural celebration) tailored for Labuan Bajo's gastronomy sector. Integrating gastronomy into tourism strategies can extend visitor stays, strengthen local identity, and foster inclusive economic growth.

**Keywords:** gastronomy tourism; product diversification; Labuan Bajo; culinary heritage; sustainable tourism

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

Labuan Bajo, a small town in Manggarai Barat, Flores, Indonesia, has rapidly emerged as one of the nation's flagship tourism destinations, largely owing to its

proximity to Komodo National Park, stunning marine biodiversity, and picturesque landscapes. However, the focus on nature-based tourism has overshadowed other potential tourism assets, particularly those rooted in local culture and heritage.



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Global tourism trends have shifted toward authentic, immersive experiences, with gastronomy now recognized as a primary motivator for travel (Letunovska & Lytvynenko, 2025; Ovcharenko et al., 2021). Tourists are increasingly seeking destinations that offer not only natural beauty but also unique culinary encounters, enabling deeper engagement with local culture (Chen, 2020; Grigoriadis et al., 2025; Johar et al., 2021, Mbulu et al., 2025).

Despite its rich culinary tradition, the gastronomy of Labuan Bajo remains underdeveloped and under-promoted (Islahuddin et al., 2022; Yudhoyono et al., 2021). Local dishes, cooking techniques, and ingredients are seldom featured in the mainstream tourism experience, resulting in missed opportunities for cultural exchange and economic development (Basuki & Sari, 2024; Yubianto & Putra, 2024).

Relying solely on nature-based attractions exposes Labuan Bajo to risks such as overtourism, environmental degradation, and economic leakage. While tourist arrivals have grown, the average length of stay remains relatively short at 4–5 days, with earlier studies reporting as little as three nights (Walpole & Goodwin, 2000; Wiarti et al., 2020). Moreover, visitor spending is concentrated on diving tours, park fees, and accommodation, with limited benefits flowing to local culinary enterprises (Erb, 2010; Soesilo & Tambunan, 2023). This mono-product reliance reduces community-level economic gains and leaves the destination vulnerable to external shocks. Diversifying the tourism portfolio through gastronomy could extend visitor stays, spread expenditure across local businesses, and enhance economic and cultural sustainability (Da Mota et al., 2024; Pamukcu et al., 2021; Pinke-Sziva et al., 2025).

Many tourists recount their visits to Labuan Bajo as lacking a sense of culinary adventure. Often, restaurant menus are dominated by international fare, with

limited representation of authentic local cuisine. This disconnect diminishes the overall tourism experience and local community benefits (Kuahaty et al., 2024; Thullah & Jalloh, 2021). Interviews with local residents and culinary entrepreneurs reveal a mixture of pride in traditional foods and uncertainty about presenting them to tourists. Concerns include lack of marketing know-how, insufficient infrastructure, and fears of cultural dilution.

Recent years have seen sporadic efforts by local government and tourism stakeholders to incorporate culinary festivals and food events into the tourism calendar. However, these initiatives remain fragmented, lacking a strategic, collaborative framework (Bain, 2024; Jain et al., 2024; Sujawoto et al., 2025; Suvittawat et al., 2025).

While academic literature abounds on Labuan Bajo's ecotourism and marine attractions, there is a notable lack of research exploring the potential of local gastronomy for tourism product diversification (Da Mota et al., 2024; Gündüz et al., 2024; Hammar & Yuniarsa, 2022). There is a growing need for a holistic strategy that positions gastronomy as an integral component of the destination's value proposition, ensuring its role in sustainable tourism development and community empowerment (Ivashura et al., 2021; Macêdo et al., 2025b; Pérez et al., 2024). This study aims to explore how local gastronomy can be strategically leveraged to diversify tourism products in Labuan Bajo.

During a recent visit, a researcher participated in a local food preparation event, discovering not only unique flavors but also the pride and stories behind each dish. Such personal experiences underscore the transformative potential of gastronomy-based tourism. Recent international research highlights gastronomy as a critical driver for destination branding, product differentiation, and tourist satisfaction (Padyala & Kallu, 2025; Padyala & Kiran, 2025; Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2021; Sulaiman et al., 2022). Food-based

experiences are linked to deeper cultural engagement and repeat visitation (Gómez-Rico et al., 2021; Hernández-Rojas & Alcocer, 2021; Martin et al., 2021; Pérez et al., 2024).

Studies in diverse contexts, from Spain to Vietnam also from Indonesia (Dina et al., 2025; Pramezwarly et al. 2022; Wijaya et al., 2023), show that gastronomy tourism can contribute to community empowerment, preservation of culinary heritage, and the creation of sustainable livelihoods for local producers (Lallen, 2024; Padyala & Kiran, 2025)

Destinations such as Thailand and Peru have effectively harnessed their culinary assets, transforming signature dishes and food rituals into iconic tourism products. Strategic marketing, chef training, and storytelling have played crucial roles in these successes (Horng & Tsai, 2012; Recuero-Virto, 2025; Vuksanović et al., 2024, Abdillah et al., 2025).

Although Indonesia boasts diverse regional cuisines, research on culinary tourism in eastern regions, including Labuan Bajo, remains sparse. Studies have typically focused on Bali, Yogyakarta, or Bandung and Medan, with limited examination of eastern Indonesia's unique foodways (Levyda et al., 2024; Pramezwarly et al., 2022; Vuksanović et al., 2024)

This study addresses a significant gap by examining how Labuan Bajo's indigenous culinary resources can be integrated into tourism product development. Unlike prior studies that focus on documenting food items, this research investigates the processes, stakeholder dynamics, and challenges involved.

The research draws on theories of experiential tourism, community-based tourism, and sustainable gastronomy to frame its analysis. By focusing on stakeholder perspectives and lived experiences, it offers new insights into how gastronomy can drive sustainable tourism (Macêdo et al., 2025a; Oloyede et al., 2024; Pivarski et al., 2024; Uludağ, 2019).

The Experience Economy Theory, introduced by (Pine, Joseph and Gilmore, 1998) suggests that economic progress has evolved from commodities and goods, through services, to experiences. In this paradigm, experiences are considered a distinct economic offering, with value created by staging memorable, authentic, and emotionally resonant activities for consumers. The tourism industry, in particular, exemplifies this shift, as destinations strive to create immersive encounters that engage tourists on emotional, physical, and intellectual levels. Recent research has expanded the theory's application to hospitality and tourism, highlighting that memorable experiences are now crucial for tourist satisfaction, loyalty, and destination differentiation (Kahraman & Cifci, 2022; Stavrianea & Kamenidou, 2021; Tulung et al., 2025)

In the context of gastronomy tourism, the Experience Economy is especially relevant. Gastronomy tourism is inherently experiential: it invites travellers to participate in local food preparation, savor traditional flavours, and interact with cultural narratives embedded in cuisine. These encounters foster a sense of place and connection that goes beyond passive consumption of food. Research by (Juliana et al., 2024, 2023) demonstrated that memorable experiences such as those found in culinary workshops or local food festivals positively influence visitors' memories and loyalty, supporting the argument that destination managers should focus on staging authentic gastronomic experiences.

Applying this theory to Labuan Bajo, the present study frames local gastronomy not just as a product, but as an immersive experience capable of creating lasting impressions. By engaging tourists in local culinary traditions through cooking classes, food tours, and market visits Labuan Bajo can enhance its appeal and encourage longer stays, repeat visits, and positive word-of-mouth. This experiential approach has the potential to distinguish Labuan Bajo from other nature-based

destinations in Indonesia, helping it build a more resilient and diversified tourism economy.

Middle-range theories of destination branding and product diversification further inform this research. Castillo-Villar, (2020) argue that strong destination brands are built by leveraging unique local assets that embody the culture and identity of a place. In tourism, developing distinctive products such as local gastronomy strengthens a destination's brand, increases competitiveness, and appeals to a broader range of market segments. Coelho (2025) and Jerez (2023) found that food tourism contributes significantly to destination branding, influencing both initial tourist choice and subsequent loyalty.

In Labuan Bajo, integrating local gastronomy into the tourism offering aligns with these theoretical principles. By developing and promoting culinary experiences that are unique to the region, stakeholders can diversify the tourism product, reduce dependency on nature-based attractions, and tap into new visitor markets (Basuki & Sari, 2024; Hammar & Yuniarsa, 2022). This strategy supports both economic and cultural sustainability, as it incentivizes the preservation of culinary heritage and the empowerment of local communities. The literature suggests that a diversified tourism portfolio enhances visitor satisfaction, destination resilience, and economic inclusivity (Fatina et al., 2023; Islahuddin et al., 2022; Siagian et al., 2023; Yubianto & Putra, 2024)

Recent scholarship underscores gastronomy's growing role in sustainable tourism, community development, and cultural preservation. Macêdo et al. (2025a) and Oloyede et al. (2024) highlight that integrating gastronomy into tourism strategies can drive sustainable development by creating local economic opportunities and safeguarding intangible heritage. Furthermore, Ivashura et al. (2021) and Sjölander-Lindqvist et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of cross-sector collaboration between government or policymakers, local

businesses, and communities to implement gastronomy-led tourism successfully. This holistic approach is increasingly recognized as vital for fostering innovation, inclusivity, and competitive advantage in the tourism sector.

However, most research in Indonesia has concentrated on culinary tourism in well-established destinations such as Bali and Yogyakarta, leaving regions like Labuan Bajo underexplored. Riady et al. (2024) and Suparjo et al. (2024) identified a significant gap in both academic and policy discussions regarding the mechanisms, stakeholder relationships, and infrastructural needs required to integrate gastronomy into tourism in eastern Indonesia. The present study responds to this gap by focusing on the lived experiences, challenges, and collaborative potential of stakeholders in Labuan Bajo, thus contributing to both the theoretical and practical understanding of gastronomy tourism product diversification.

### Research Objectives

This study aims to explore and harness the potential of local gastronomy as a means to diversify tourism products in Labuan Bajo, Manggarai Barat, a destination predominantly known for its natural attractions. Despite growing attention to gastronomy tourism, existing studies in Indonesia have focused mainly on natural and marine attractions, with limited examination of how local gastronomy can be systematically integrated into tourism strategies. In particular, there is insufficient analysis of stakeholder collaboration mechanisms and experience design models that could position local food as a potential tourism product in Labuan Bajo.

To address this gap, this study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How can local gastronomy be harnessed to diversify the tourism products of Labuan Bajo?; (2) What challenges and opportunities are perceived by key stakeholders (chefs, entrepreneurs, government, community leaders) in developing

gastronomy-based tourism?; and (3) What collaborative and experiential frameworks can enhance the integration of gastronomy based tourism into Labuan Bajo's tourism development?.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Gastronomy tourism, also known as culinary tourism, has emerged as a significant trend in the global tourism industry, increasingly recognized for its role in enriching tourist experiences and driving destination competitiveness (UNWTO, 2019). Gastronomy tourism refers to travel motivated, at least in part, by the pursuit of unique culinary experiences, food culture, and local food heritage (Ellis et al., 2018; Okumus et al., 2021). The integration of local food into the tourism product not only enhances visitor satisfaction but also supports local economies and preserves cultural identity (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019).

Tourism product diversification is increasingly seen as a strategy to enhance destination resilience and competitiveness in the face of evolving market demands and global uncertainties (Telfer & Wall, 2020). Gastronomy, due to its deep roots in local culture and potential for storytelling, has become a key avenue for differentiation (Kivela & Crofts, 2016). Research shows that destinations leveraging their unique gastronomy can attract new market segments, extend tourists' length of stay, and foster repeat visitation (Sims, 2009; Okumus et al., 2021). Product diversification through gastronomy often encompasses food festivals, culinary trails, cooking classes, farm-to-table experiences, and the promotion of indigenous and traditional foods (UNWTO, 2022; Kim & Ellis, 2015).

Local cuisine functions as a symbol of place identity and a source of authentic tourism experience (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019). Studies highlight that tourists increasingly seek immersive experiences, with food serving as a medium for

cultural interaction and memory creation (Williams et al., 2022; Tsai, 2020). In particular, the consumption of local food is associated with heightened destination image, greater tourist satisfaction, and stronger word-of-mouth promotion (Zainal et al., 2021).

Indonesia is globally recognized for its rich and diverse culinary heritage, reflecting a blend of indigenous, colonial, and international influences (Paramita et al., 2023). Despite its potential, the integration of gastronomy into tourism development has faced challenges such as lack of coordinated branding, insufficient infrastructure, and limited involvement of local communities (Utami et al., 2020). The government has recently prioritized gastronomy as part of the "Wonderful Indonesia" branding, with destinations like Labuan Bajo poised to benefit from product diversification initiatives (Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, 2023).

Labuan Bajo, known primarily as a gateway to Komodo National Park, has traditionally focused on nature and adventure tourism (Fitriani et al., 2023). However, an over-reliance on these core products exposes the region to risks such as market saturation and environmental degradation (Susanti et al., 2022). Recent studies advocate for the diversification of tourism products, with gastronomy identified as a promising yet underdeveloped sector (Yuningsih et al., 2024). Manggarai Barat's indigenous food traditions, such as Bobo, Nasi Kolo, and locally-sourced seafood, offer unique value propositions for both domestic and international tourists.

International best practices underscore the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration, storytelling, product authenticity, and market-oriented packaging in successful gastronomy tourism development (UNWTO, 2022; Sims, 2009). The empowerment of local communities, chef ambassadorship, food mapping, and digital marketing are cited as critical enablers (Tsai, 2020; Williams et al., 2022). Furthermore, sustainability and inclusion are

increasingly essential, aligning gastronomic initiatives with the principles of responsible tourism (Telfer & Wall, 2020).

Despite global and national enthusiasm, empirical research on the potential and practical pathways for gastronomy-based product diversification in Labuan Bajo is still limited. Existing studies tend to focus on general tourism development or environmental sustainability, with gastronomy receiving insufficient scholarly attention (Fitriani et al., 2023; Yuningsih et al., 2024). Thus, there is a clear need to investigate how local gastronomy can be leveraged to diversify tourism offerings, enhance visitor experience, and promote sustainable development in Manggarai Barat.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with integrating local gastronomy into tourism product diversification in Labuan Bajo, Manggarai Barat. The case study approach is chosen for its strength in capturing contextual nuances and the lived experiences of multiple stakeholders within a specific locale (Hudon et al., 2021). The research was conducted in Labuan Bajo, Manggarai Barat, Flores, Indonesia a rapidly developing tourism destination with rich but underexplored gastronomy traditions.

The target population comprised stakeholders directly involved or affected by gastronomy and tourism in Labuan Bajo. Data collection involved 25 participants comprising local chefs (5), culinary entrepreneurs (6), tourism operators (4), community leaders (4), local government officials (3), and visiting tourists (3). These groups were selected because of their strategic roles in shaping gastronomy tourism development: chefs and entrepreneurs contribute culinary expertise and innovation; tourism operators facilitate visitor experiences; community leaders represent cultural custodianship; government officials

provide regulatory and developmental perspectives; and visiting tourists offer consumer insights. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure a diverse and representative selection of participants with rich insights on the research questions.

The informant were recruited, including local chefs/culinary entrepreneurs, tourism operators, community leaders, government officials, and domestic tourists. Inclusion criteria required at least one year of active involvement in their respective field (culinary practice, tourism services, policymaking, or community leadership). Exclusion criteria included individuals with limited engagement (less than one year) or those unable to provide informed consent

The study explored variables/themes such as local culinary heritage, stakeholder collaboration, barriers to gastronomic tourism development, tourist experiences, and perceived impacts of gastronomy-driven product diversification. Data collection instruments included Semi-structured interview guides for in-depth interviews with stakeholders; Focus group discussion protocols for collective reflection among community members and tourism operators; Observation checklists for documenting practices and interactions during culinary events, local markets, and food festivals.

All research instruments were developed based on relevant literature and refined through a pilot study involving local stakeholders. Data were collected using audio-recorded interviews and discussions, supported by field notes and photographs (with participant consent). Interviews and focus groups were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia depending on participant preference and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. A thematic analysis approach was applied, following (Creswell, 2014) six-phase framework: familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Data

adequacy was established through thematic saturation, which was reached when no new codes emerged after the second focus group and the final three interviews.

Analytical rigor was ensured through triangulation (cross-verification using interviews, focus groups, and observations), member checking (participants' validation of key findings), and peer debriefing among the research team. Reflective notes and analytic memos were maintained throughout to capture researcher biases and contextual factors influencing data interpretation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Overview of Labuan Bajo Local Culinary Heritage

This study identified ten signature dishes of Manggarai Barat with high potential for development as leading gastronomy tourism products: Kolo (bamboo-grilled rice), Rebok (rice or corn flour mixed with coconut), Catemak Jagung (corn soup with beans and moringa leaves), Jagung Titi (traditional Flores flattened popcorn), Se'i (smoked meat), Rumpu Rampe (stir-fried papaya leaves and flowers), Manggulu (banana and peanut sweet snack), Sambal Lu'at (fermented chili condiment), Bobo (traditional sago porridge), and Sekang Iling Bamboo Rice (produced by local SME D'Datangs). These foods not only possess unique flavors but also embody deep cultural meanings, historical narratives, and the identity of the Manggarai Barat community. For example, Kolo is often served during traditional ceremonies and family gatherings, giving it a strong symbolic value. This is consistent with the findings of (Riady et al., 2024; Tulung et al., 2025) who emphasize that local cuisine often represents intangible cultural heritage and serves as a medium for storytelling and cultural transmission.

### Tourist Consumption Patterns and Perceptions

Participatory observations and

interviews with both domestic and international tourists revealed that most visitors are interested in trying local foods, especially when dishes are presented with educational and cultural storytelling components. One tourist expressed surprise at the distinctive taste and texture of jagung titi for example, a type of chips that can be found easily throughout Flores, reflecting a curiosity and openness to authentic culinary experiences. As one international visitor expressed: *"I had never tasted jagung titi before, its smoky-natural corn savory-sweetness taste, and crispy texture reminded me of village life, and when the vendor explained how it is made by flattening the corn kernels one by one with hand - That story made me appreciate it even more."*

Other tourists emphasized the uniqueness of local ingredients and preparation methods. For instance, a domestic tourist described: *"The grilled se'i meat made with local spices was unlike anything I've eaten elsewhere. It felt connected to the land and people here. I can imagine how the beef was slow cooked in traditionally smokey technique"* Such reflections suggest that gastronomy experiences foster not only culinary satisfaction but also a sense of cultural immersion. Jagung titi and se'i are typical East Nusa Tenggara foods that are easily found in various stalls or restaurants around Labuan Bajo. This menu is already known as a typical East Nusa Tenggara food. Even though there are many more local West Manggarai-Labuan Bajo foods that exist but are not yet known by tourists.

Moreover, visitors also valued the narratives shared by chefs and hosts during food preparation. One foreign participant remarked: *"What I enjoyed was not just the food, but the way the chef told us about its philosophy—it made me feel part of the culture, not just a visitor."* These accounts underscore the role of gastronomy as both a sensory and symbolic experience, reinforcing its potential as a driver for tourism product diversification in Labuan Bajo.

However, several challenges were also evident. Some tourists perceived the visual presentation of traditional foods as less appealing, and many lacked understandings of the philosophy or cultural background of the dishes. This aligns with (Matondang et al., 2019), which asserts that gastronomy achieves maximum impact when positioned at higher levels of the tourist experience hierarchy not merely as physiological sustenance, but as a medium for cultural education and engagement. (Antonio, 2022; Juliana et al., 2022, 2023) also reinforce that memorable food experiences are central to destination distinctiveness and tourist satisfaction, particularly when culinary products are integrated into storytelling and local narratives.

### **The Role of Local Entrepreneurs and Communities**

A case study of Sekang Iling D'Datang, a local culinary SME, illustrates how entrepreneurs innovate while preserving traditional values. The bamboo rice product retains authentic preparation methods but is offered in eco-friendly packaging and accompanied by narrative storytelling for visitors. Field observations noted how the owner explained the symbolism of bamboo in Manggarai culture while serving the dish. One entrepreneur emphasized: *"We want tourists to see that bamboo rice is more than food—it tells a story about our land and respect for nature."*

Tourists also expressed appreciation for these entrepreneurial efforts. As one visitor shared: *"I liked how the seller told us why bamboo is important here. Eating the rice felt like joining a tradition, not just buying food."* Such accounts demonstrate that local SMEs not only enhance the culinary offer but also act as cultural ambassadors, reinforcing identity and authenticity within tourism experiences.

This approach is consistent with the experiential food tourism concept, where

the product is not just consumed but experienced through multisensory and narrative dimensions (Ali, Hussain, & Ragavan, 2014; Cavicchi & Santini, 2022). The SME also demonstrates collaboration with local farmers for ingredient supply and with village tourism communities, thus fostering a circular, community-based economy. This echoes findings from Mgonja et al. (2022), who argue that sustainable culinary tourism development is most effective when rooted in community participation and economic inclusion.








### **Opportunities and Challenges for Local Gastronomy Development**




High tourist interest in authentic, unique experiences, an abundance of natural and organic local ingredients, and active community engagement in preserving traditional recipes all represent significant opportunities. Based on the result findings from the interview and observations; Table 1 further demonstrates the potential for local businesses (SMEs) to develop and promote these gastronomy products, allowing visitors to both enjoy and experience the unique local dishes of Labuan Bajo.

The SWOT analysis resulted from the findings on this research in table 2 reveals several key challenges: local foods suffer from limited and unappealing digital promotion, culinary experiences are not integrated into official tourism routes, and entrepreneurs lack sufficient training in food presentation and hospitality.

Opportunities identified include High tourist interest in authentic, unique experiences; Abundant natural and organic local ingredients; Active community engagement in preserving traditional recipes. Challenges faced include Limited appealing digital and visual promotion of local foods; Lack of integration of culinary experiences into official Labuan Bajo tourism routes; Insufficient training for entrepreneurs in food presentation and hospitality.

**Table 1.** Observation Results of Traditional Dishes in Labuan Bajo

No	Name	Category	Description	Main Ingredients	Preparation	Socio-Cultural Value	Figure
1	Bobo/Tibu	Protein – Main Course	Traditional Manggarai dish of meat (beef, chicken, or pork) and vegetables inside bamboo, cooked over coals.	Meat, tubers (taro, cassava), shallots, garlic, ginger, basil, candlenut, celery, pepper, salt, chili, lemongrass	Spices are ground and mixed with meat, marinated, placed in bamboo, sealed with lemongrass, slow-cooked near coals for 3–5 hours	Served at traditional ceremonies; symbolizes survival and resilience.	
2	Rebok & Kopi Tuk	Snack	Snack made of rice/corn flour, grated coconut, palm sugar, and eggs, served with Manggarai coffee (Kopi Tuk).	Aged corn, grated coconut, palm sugar	Corn ground to flour, roasted, mixed with coconut, cooked, mixed with palm sugar	Served at traditional ceremonies and for welcoming guests.	 
3	Songkol	Snack/Carbohydrate	Cassava flour and palm sugar steamed in bamboo using clay pots, often enjoyed with grilled dried fish.	Cassava flour, palm sugar	Flour placed in bamboo, cooked in clay pot	Represents sustainable local food processing.	
4	Latung Bombo	Carbohydrate Substitute	Dried corn, coarsely ground and boiled into porridge with coconut milk, salt, and pepper.	Corn, coconut milk, salt	Corn ground, mixed with coconut milk and salt, cooked in clay pot	Used as rice substitute, especially in traditional society.	
5	Lomak	Vegetable Dish	Boiled vegetable mix (cassava leaves, papaya flower, etc.), seasoned with roasted candlenut, shallots, and chili.	Grated coconut, shallots, garlic, vegetables	Vegetables sliced, sautéed with spices, cooked together	Common at traditional ceremonies; healthy and local.	
6	Baru	Protein – Main Course	Meat (chicken/fish) with local spices, wrapped in bancang leaves, grilled	Meat (chicken/fish), local spices, bancang leaves	Meat spiced, wrapped in leaves, grilled	Blends local flora with traditional techniques.	

No	Name	Category	Description	Main Ingredients	Preparation	Socio-Cultural Value	Figure
			over coals (similar to pepes).				
7	Nuru Cuing	Protein/Preserved Meat	Meat smoked with kosambi leaves for about 4 hours, preserved with a smoky taste. Served with red rice.	Meat, garlic, shallots, pepper, coriander, salt, lontar leaves	Meat sliced, mixed with spices, marinated, hung over fire to smoke	Smoking as preservation method, reflects adaptation and tradition.	
8	Kolo	Carbohydrate/Rice Dish	Rice with coconut, chili, and spices cooked in bamboo, served with sides like grilled fish or chicken.	Rice, coconut, chili, spices, banana leaves, vegetables/meats	Rice mixed with spices, placed in bamboo, roasted 5–6 hours	Made for journeys or visiting relatives; practical and long-lasting.	
9	Lenco	Snack	Mashed corn/sweet potato with sugar and coconut, steamed in corn husks, served with coffee or tea.	Corn/sweet potato, palm sugar, grated coconut	Pounded, wrapped in husk, steamed, served with sugar and coconut	Symbolizes hospitality and community.	
10	Serabe	Snack/Traditional Cake	Cake made from rice and wheat flour, palm sugar, and coconut milk. Important in ceremonies and gatherings.	Rice flour, wheat flour, palm sugar, coconut milk	Flours and sugar mixed, coconut milk added, cooked on pan	Plays a key role in rituals and social life.	

Source: Processed Data Result (2025)

These findings underscore the need for strategic integration of gastronomy into the core tourism offerings of Labuan Bajo. In line with Wang, Zhang, and Morrison (2020), who highlight food tourism's role in destination branding, this study suggests that embedding local cuisine into travel

packages—such as boat tours, visits to traditional houses, or cultural cooking classes can enrich the visitor experience and increase length of stay. Such integration is also advocated by the UNWTO (2019) as a way to maximize the economic and cultural value of gastronomy for destinations.

**Table 2. SWOT Analysis**

<b>Strengths</b>		<b>Weaknesses</b>	
1.	Rich and unique traditional culinary heritage	1.	Limited visual/digital promotion of local cuisine
2.	Abundance of natural, organic local ingredients	2.	Lack of integration in official tourism routes
3.	Strong cultural values and symbolism attached to local dishes	3.	Insufficient training in food presentation and hospitality
4.	Community willingness to preserve and share food traditions	4.	Limited capacity among local SMEs for tourism-scale production
5.	Growing collaboration between local SMEs, farmers, and communities	5.	Perception among some tourists that local food is less attractive
<b>Opportunities</b>		<b>Threats</b>	
1.	High tourist interest in authentic, experiential culinary tourism	1.	Risk of cultural commodification or loss of authenticity
2.	Potential for culinary events, festivals, and cooking workshops	2.	Competition from mainstream/Western culinary offerings
3.	Expansion of tourism beyond Komodo National Park	3.	Economic dependency on a niche segment
4.	Support for sustainable, community-based economic growth	4.	Seasonality or fluctuation in tourist arrivals
5.	Digital marketing and storytelling to reach global audiences	5.	Potential supply chain disruption for local ingredients
6.	Policy support from tourism authorities	6.	Limited access to investment for culinary business development
		<b>Opportunities (O)</b>	<b>Threats (T)</b>
<b>Strengths (S)</b>		S-O: Develop immersive culinary experiences, farm-to-table tours, community-driven festivals, and integrate gastronomy into tourism packages (S1, O1)	S-T: Community leadership for authenticity, diversify menus in hospitality sector, build resilient supply chains, attract diverse traveller segments (S1, T1)
<b>Weaknesses (W)</b>		W-O: Capacity building, improved digital marketing, integrate culinary routes into itineraries, co-operative business model (W1, O5)	W-T: Skills upgrading, diversified funding, adaptive products, strengthen community-based crisis responses (W4, T6)

Source: Processed Data Result (2025)

### **Gastronomy as a Flagship Tourism Product A Development Model**

The study proposes a three-stage model for developing a gastronomy tourism route: (1) Stage 1: Education & Exploration; Cooking classes and live demonstrations at local culinary sites; (2) Stage 2: Taste Exploration; Guided culinary tours of traditional markets and local eateries; (3) Stage 3: Cultural Celebration; Annual local food festivals and cultural performances.

This model seeks not only to provide sensory experiences but also to foster cultural ownership and pride among both tourists and local residents. Such a layered approach is in line with the Experience Economy framework (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Ali et al., 2014), emphasizing that staged, meaningful, and memorable experiences create lasting value for both hosts and visitors.

The field findings support the premise that gastronomy can serve as a strategic tool for diversifying Labuan Bajo's tourism product. Key implications include:

1. Spreading tourist activity beyond Komodo National Park by attracting visitors to culinary and cultural sites.
2. Empowering local SMEs and farmers through integrated gastronomy supply chains.
3. Positioning Labuan Bajo as a unique destination for culinary and cultural tourism, thus increasing the average length of stay and visitor spending.

The success of these strategies will depend on building the capacity of local entrepreneurs, supportive government policies, and investment in digital promotion and hospitality training. As demonstrated by Cavicchi & Santini (2022), collaborative and well-promoted gastronomy tourism initiatives can foster sustainability, preserve intangible heritage, and create a sense of shared value within the community.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that Labuan Bajo possesses a rich and distinctive culinary heritage with significant potential to diversify the region's tourism offerings. By identifying ten signature local dishes and examining the perceptions and experiences of tourists, entrepreneurs, and community members, the research highlights how gastronomy can serve as both a cultural asset and an economic driver. The findings reveal that authentic food experiences when supported by educational storytelling, local community involvement, and sustainable business models can enhance tourist satisfaction, extend visitor stays, and promote greater community participation.

However, the development of gastronomy tourism in Labuan Bajo faces several challenges, including limited digital promotion, insufficient integration of culinary experiences into mainstream tourism routes, and a need for greater training among local entrepreneurs in hospitality and presentation. Overcoming these barriers will require coordinated efforts among local government, tourism authorities, community organizations, and small business actors.

Integrating gastronomy as a flagship tourism product in Labuan Bajo offers a promising pathway for economic resilience, cultural preservation, and competitive destination branding. This research supports the strategic prioritization of gastronomy in tourism development policies and practices, providing a model that can be replicated in other emerging destinations. The strategic prioritization of potential local gastronomy development can be set according to:

#### **Short-Term (1–2 years)**

In the short term, several actions will be prioritized to build local capacity, strengthen digital presence, and pilot gastronomic experiences. (1) Capacity Building & Training will focus on: a) providing workshops for local SMEs on hospitality,

food presentation, hygiene, and storytelling; and b) launching a “culinary ambassador” training program designed for tour guides and community hosts to enhance their culinary knowledge and communication skills. (2) Digital Promotion will emphasize: a) developing an official online platform (website and social media) that showcases local dishes, culinary maps, and tour packages; and b) encouraging SMEs to adopt digital menus, register their businesses on Google Maps, and leverage social media marketing to reach wider audiences. (3) Pilot Gastronomy Experiences will be introduced through: a) small-scale cooking classes, food workshops, and tasting sessions that allow tourists to engage directly with local culinary traditions; and b) partnerships with liveaboard boat operators to integrate authentic local meals into their itineraries.

#### Medium-Term (3–5 years)

Over the medium term, the program will expand to create stronger institutional support, build structured culinary routes, and foster community-driven partnerships. (1) Policy & Institutional Support will involve: a) integrating gastronomy into the regional tourism master plan to ensure long-term alignment with development goals; and b) establishing incentives for businesses that prioritize sustainable sourcing, eco-friendly packaging, and the use of locally sourced ingredients. (2) Culinary Routes & Festivals will be developed by: a) creating official gastronomy trails that highlight markets, traditional kitchens, and village eateries; and b) hosting an annual gastronomy festival to promote local dishes and attract international attention. (3) Community-Driven Partnerships will be encouraged by: a) forming cooperatives among farmers, fishermen, and restaurateurs to strengthen supply chain resilience; and b) fostering cross-sector collaboration between tourism operators, culinary SMEs, and cultural institutions.

#### Long-Term (5–10 years)

In the long term, Labuan Bajo will position itself as a recognized gastronomy hub through international branding, improved infrastructure, and research-driven innovation. (1) Destination Branding will aim to: a) position Labuan Bajo as the gastronomy hub of Eastern Indonesia through international campaigns; and b) build partnerships with UNESCO, ASEAN, and other global culinary tourism networks to strengthen credibility. (2) Infrastructure Development will focus on: a) establishing a Culinary and Cultural Center that showcases local food heritage and provides a hub for culinary education; and b) improving market facilities and food safety infrastructure to meet international standards. (3) Research & Innovation will support: a) universities and research centers in documenting culinary heritage and studying tourist behavior; and b) the promotion of food innovation through the development of fusion dishes and sustainable recipes while maintaining authenticity.

#### Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) Strategy Key Indicators:

To measure progress, the Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) framework will track key indicators across tourism, community, culture, and sustainability. (1) Tourism Impact will be assessed through: a) the average length of stay of tourists; b) the percentage of tourists participating in gastronomy activities; and c) the increase in per-visitor spending on food-related activities. (2) Community & Business Impact will be measured by: a) the number of SMEs trained and actively engaged in gastronomy tourism; b) growth in income among local food entrepreneurs; and c) the participation rate of local communities in festivals and culinary routes. (3) Cultural Preservation will be tracked through: a) the number of traditional dishes documented and promoted; and b) the inclusion of gastronomy heritage in school and community programs. (4) Sustainability will be monitored by: a) the percentage of food

businesses adopting eco-friendly packaging; and b) the extent of locally sourced ingredient use in tourism gastronomy packages.

For implementation, the methods will combine both quantitative and qualitative approaches. (1) Annual Surveys will be conducted to collect tourist feedback on food experiences. (2) Stakeholder Roundtables will serve as bi-annual forums bringing together SMEs, government, and community representatives. (3) Digital Tracking will monitor online engagement such as website traffic and social media reach. (4) Independent Evaluation will be commissioned to third parties to ensure objective assessment and credibility of results.

Ultimately, Labuan Bajo's journey toward becoming a leading gastronomy tourism destination depends on inclusive collaboration, ongoing capacity building, and innovative marketing to share its culinary stories with the world.

To capitalize on the identified potential of Labuan Bajo's culinary heritage, stakeholders should focus on designing immersive gastronomy experiences that are integrated into official tourism packages. This includes regular cooking classes and food workshops for tourists, curated culinary tours to traditional markets and home-based eateries, and the inclusion of local food tasting experiences on established travel routes such as liveaboard boat trips or cultural village tours. Collaboration between local entrepreneurs, food producers, and tourism operators should be encouraged to develop a sustainable and quality-driven supply chain.

Local government and tourism authorities should prioritize gastronomy tourism within their strategic plans by allocating dedicated resources and support programs. Policy recommendations include organizing training and capacity-building for culinary SMEs, offering incentives for eco-friendly packaging and sustainable sourcing, and supporting the digital promotion of local dishes through official tourism

platforms. The establishment of annual gastronomy festivals and the formal inclusion of culinary routes in the regional tourism calendar can further enhance visibility and visitor engagement.

The successful integration of gastronomy into Labuan Bajo's tourism sector has the potential to extend visitor length of stay, increase tourist spending, and create new income streams for local communities. This approach supports the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and encourages community-based, inclusive economic growth. Furthermore, the strategies developed in Labuan Bajo may serve as a model for other emerging destinations in Indonesia and the wider Southeast Asian region, strengthening destination competitiveness and resilience.

This study has several limitations. First, the qualitative case study design limits the generalizability of findings beyond Labuan Bajo; insights are context-specific and may not be applicable to other regions without adaptation. Second, the participant sample, though diverse, was relatively small and mainly composed of stakeholders directly involved in the local tourism and culinary sectors. Additionally, the research was conducted over a limited period, which may not fully capture changes in culinary tourism trends, tourist preferences, or stakeholder dynamics throughout the year.

Further research should consider employing mixed methods approaches, combining qualitative insights with quantitative surveys to reach a broader cross-section of tourists and local actors. Longitudinal studies tracking the impact of gastronomy tourism development over multiple years could provide more robust evidence of its economic, cultural, and social effects. Comparative studies between Labuan Bajo and other destinations within Indonesia and internationally would also help identify best practices and innovative models for integrating gastronomy into sustainable tourism development.

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