

# A Western Cape Food Tour: Examining Indigenous Foods in Eateries Through the Lived Experience Model

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**Abstract:** Drawing attention to indigenous foods is economically advantageous for local communities growing plants to sell to the food industry, to promote food tourism and establishing alternative food systems characterised by lower costs, lessened environmental impact, and local availability. There is evidence that indigenous land stewardship could reinforce indigenous food sovereignty by recovering indigenous foods that could disappear.

Although South African cuisine is not globally recognised as an ethnic cuisine, interest in it is growing, as its recent 52<sup>nd</sup> ranking (out of 100) on the TasteAtlas.com global cuisine rankings for 2023/2024 shows. Increasing understanding, availability, and celebration of indigenous foods in commercial eateries is therefore critical, along with an understanding of their sociocultural contextuality.

Lived experience was the predominant guiding methodological model for this research. The researchers used qualitative phenomenological reporting to present their first-hand lived experiences, along with knowledge gained through meaning making of indigenous and heritage foods. Although this model has been criticised for methodology slurring, attention to academic rigour (in line with Husserl and Heidegger's applied philosophical viewpoints) ensured that the knowledge gained was grounded in the researchers' own experiences. The researchers report key insights and meaning making from their eating experiences and indigenous foods found during a food tour from 17 to 22 September 2023, along a predetermined road route within the Western Cape province of South Africa.

This research contributes to the unique application of lived experience within the hospitality and tourism environments, and particularly the application of IPA (Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis) to assess participants' ways of making meaning of indigenous food offerings found in eateries in detail.

**Keywords** Indigenous Foods, Food Tourism, South African Cuisine, Lived Experience, IPA (Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis)

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## 1. Background and Problem

A systematic review of indigenous food plants by Nxusani et al. (2023) details the importance of promoting indigenous foods through policies, developing better and advanced capabilities and skills, more in-depth research, and extensive investigations into the composition of indigenous foods. Kapoor et al. (2022) shows how recognition of indigenous foods can improve food security, while simultaneously enhancing biodiversity and preserving ancestral knowledge. Extensive evidence of the positive health claims of foods produced from indigenous ingredients which could contribute positively to alleviate nutrition and food security concerns (Kunyanga et al. 2013) also exist.

This research aimed to provide evidence of commercially available indigenous foods, which may include unconventional food plants (UFPs) (Milião et al. 2022). The purpose was to present evidence to researchers, environmentalists, tourism and food industry players, and others that indigenous foods are being used in commercial hospitality eateries. Increased awareness and knowledge of the potential added value of indigenous foods could benefit broader society, and increased knowledge of the advantages of indigenous foods within the culinary and hospitality industries, aligned with the four pillars of cuisine (ingredients, flavourings, preparation methods and social aspects) can enhance our culinary heritage. Currently, little information is available regarding the preparation of South African indigenous foods, how they are seasoned and flavoured, and their contextual roles in food heritage. Although South Africa is considered a food secure country, it is nutritionally insecure, and research has demonstrated the superior nutrient-richness and lessened environmental impact of indigenous foods. Increased awareness of indigenous foods and their nutritional value would benefit future food systems and food tourism. The research question is therefore: What "meaning making" is to be found of indigenous food applications in eateries available during a predetermined Western Cape food tour?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Indigenous Foods

Academic literature provides various interpretations for the concept “indigenous foods”. Frequently the term implies indigenous ingredients, wild foods or indigenous plants spontaneously growing in natural ecosystems (Kapoor et al. 2022), mostly context or geographically specific, or obtained locally (Joseph and Turner 2020). In these instances, indigenous foods refer to edible plant and animal food products or ingredients forming part of a traditional diet (Asogwa et al. 2017). Some researchers consider indigenous foods to be “naturally existing” and/or “produced in specific locations” (Rampa et al. 2020). Indigenous foods may also include unconventional food plants (UFPs), underutilised plant species that can be used as human food. Despite spontaneous growth, they generally have low market value and are often sold only on a small scale (Cobus et al. 2023).

Indigenous production and/or processing techniques associated with traditional knowledge (Asogwa et al. 2017) are also considered indigenous foods. These heritage or traditional foods represent a culture (Mihiranie et al. 2020) and are also referred to as ancestral or original foods. Heritage foods are defined as traditional local foods that are inherited, prepared and practiced daily, rooted in a mixture of various cultures, religious practices and beliefs (Omar et al. 2015). Members of a culture often act as guardians of knowledge about the use of such unconventional foods (Andreoli et al. 2022). The authenticity of heritage foods is measured against aspects such as origin, preparation, ingredients, recipes, and the specific context pertaining to the serving and presentation of the food (Assiouras et al. 2015).

Most ingredients require preparation or processing before eating. The evolution of indigenous foods requires in-depth understanding of local flora and fauna, and the preparations and conversion methods representing a society’s culinary heritage (Mihiranie et al. 2020). In this research the term “indigenous foods” refers to both the actual indigenous ingredient (and its traditional or non-traditional use) as well as any culturally specific South African food dishes.

In countries like Australia, where indigenous ingredients (also called bush food) have long been used, wild foods have become part of the repertoire of modern-derived cuisine. Often (but not exclusively so) these ingredients feature on “fine dining” menus, promoting the use of bush foods (Bannerman 2006). Australia has seen increasing popularity of native flora and fauna ingredients, and “an increasing range of products, restaurant dishes and home-cooked meals” (Craw 2008) featuring such ingredients. Even in multicultural societies such as the US, menus celebrating regional distinctions and dishes designed to showcase indigenous ingredients are found. Cookbook author and chef Freddie Bitsoie develops menus incorporating sacred indigenous foodways (Bitsoie and Fraioli 2021), similar to another Native American recipe book fusing traditional with the modern (George 2013).

This research explores present-day contemporary cuisine incorporating cultural ingredients, authentic flavours, and traditional preparation methods (Yamamoto 2017).

### 2.2 Food Tours

Food tourism generates considerable global revenue, employment, and academic research. The concept describes tourists’ exploration of a destination through local food and beverage experiences (Carvalho et al. 2023). Food tours are defined as “thematic experiences that combine history and traditions with gastronomy and allow tourists to get in-depth knowledge of a destination and its features (local ingredients and dishes representative of local culture) as well as of culinary techniques and eating habits, in a personal and interactive way” (Carvalho et al. 2023). Food tours allow tourists to immerse themselves in local culture, interacting with communities and experiencing the typical regional gastronomy. Knowledgeable and experienced locals often guide tourists to typical local eateries with noticeable cultural features (Kaushal and Yadav 2021).

The researchers undertook a food tour by car, as a potential gastronomy tourist would, and documented their “lived experience” to collect data showing the use of indigenous foods in commercial eateries. Framing the research in a hermeneutic view, the researchers avoided merely describing the tour experience, aiming to prioritise making meaning of the contexts in which indigenous foods are used (Heotis 2020). The research could be classified as a field trip, where researchers travel to a location to speak directly with local stakeholders, immerse themselves in an environment to gain first-hand experiences (Eden et al. 2019) and gather data regarding the offering of indigenous foods.

### 2.3 Lived Experience

Although the qualitative phenomenological methodology of lived experience is often used in medical fields (Davén et al. 2022), it has been used in hospitality and tourism research (Tucker and Deale 2018) and in the specific example of music festival-goers (Jackson et al. 2018).

Lived experience refers to the knowledge of everyday events people gain through direct or first-hand experiences, participation, or involvement. This contrasts with other types of knowledge obtaining which is done through representations by second-hand or mediated sources. Researchers often hope to gain thorough understanding of the essence or essential “truths” through the lived experience (Byrne 2001).

The two foremost phenomenological philosophies of lived experience are Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology and Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology (McConnell-Henry et al. 2009). Husserl introduced the concept of lived experience or experiences within the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) (Koch 1995). His pre-reflective approach of examining the world advocates the idea of epoché or “bracketing” – to reveal the true essence of the lived experience, all preconceived ideas should be set aside (Stumpf and Fieser 2007). Heidegger encouraged interpretation rather than description, wanting to derive meaning from being, and saw the researcher as a legitimate part of the research; the researcher is in fact “in” the participant’s world (McConnell-Henry et al. 2009).

Although these two epistemological positions differ, they both explore the lived experience. Critics of Heidegger’s philosophy have suggested that the researchers’ involvement could influence or corrupt the data. Heidegger believed that humans are naturally interpretive, and it would be impossible to “bracket” themselves from a phenomenon. To conduct a hermeneutic inquiry, the researcher should have some prior knowledge or fore-structure (McConnell-Henry et al. 2009) so that only the pertinent data is collected (Thompson 1990). The researchers in this study were able to use their hospitality background knowledge to inform their experiences.

In the case of this research, the mood of the lived experience (for example, the types of restaurants and contexts where indigenous foods were found) played an important role (McConnell-Henry et al. 2009) and enhanced the participants’ descriptions and meaning making of indigenous food examples found in eateries (Goolaup and Solér 2018).

## 3. Methodology

This research explored and attempted to make meaning of indigenous foods in eateries along a pre-determined route. Reid et al. (2005) proposes that expert participants should tell their own stories in as much detail as possible.

Even though Heidegger’s philosophy was never intended to be used as a research method, it led to the development of interpretive phenomenological research and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which facilitates explication and understanding of the lived experience (Horrigan-Kelly et al. 2016).

Data was collected through the observational method of photographic evidence, which was analysed and grouped together under the central theme of indigenous foods, and indigenous food words found on menus of eateries and retail products (Heotis 2020). Meaning was consequently elicited, constructed from the experience itself and guided by South African food culture. The core component of indigenous food offerings in eateries was therefore drawn out, analysed, interpreted, and revealed in the results.

A “less is more” approach was followed for the number of participants; two expert participants were deemed suitable (Reid et al. 2005). The two researchers cumulatively have around 80 years local and international experience in the arenas of hospitality, tourism, and indigenous foods.

### 3.1 The Study Area

The six-day road trip (Figure 1), followed a route in the Western Cape province of the Republic of South Africa. The study area was selected in accordance with Du Rand (2007), who regards the Western Cape as the province with the most potential to develop and implement food tourism in terms of resources, stakeholders, and current initiatives.

Details regarding the researchers’ lived experience food tour can be found in Table 1, starting and ending in the town of Strand. Specific dates, the towns that the researchers travelled through to reach their destinations, road numbers and specific food establishments visited along the route, are detailed.

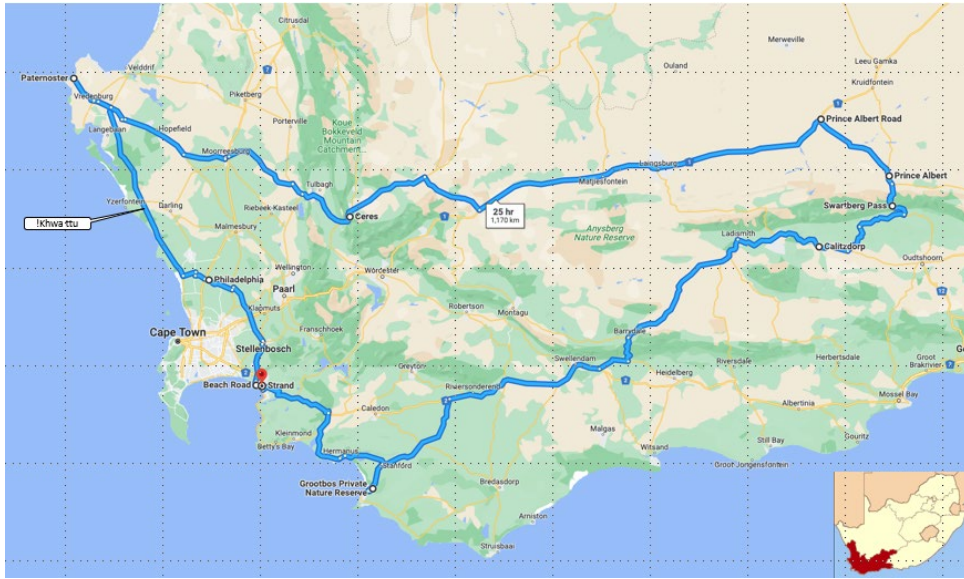


Figure 1: Six-day road trip route (map generated with GoogleMaps (2023))

Table 1: Details of Six-day road trip

Leg	Date	Town	Route	Food establishment visited
1	17 Sept	Strand to Paternoster via Philadelphia	R44, N7 and R399	Wolfgat restaurant
2	18 Sept	Paternoster		Dispens eatery, !Khwa ttu centre
3	19 Sept	Paternoster to Prince Albert via Matjiesfontein	R399, R45, R311, R46, N1 and R407	African Relish Cookery School and restaurant
4	20 Sept	Prince Albert		Lazy Lizard, Karoo Kombuis
5	21 Sept	Prince Albert to Grootbos and Strand via Barrydale and Buffeljagsrivier	R328, R62, R324, N2, R326, R43, R44	Grootbos Private Nature Reserve dining room
6	22 Sept	Strand to Stellenbosch	R44	Sustainability Institute, Spier

#### 4. Results

Although there is no right way to conduct analysis within the IPA framework (Miller et al. 2018), the intent is to identify patterns in experiences to make meaning of such experiences in social and theoretical contexts (Larkin and Thompson 2011).

Results are presented for each leg of the journey (1 – 6) (Table 1).

**Leg 1:** The researchers departed from Strand for Paternoster, where chef and cookbook author Kobus van der Merwe’s award-winning Wolfgat restaurant is located (Van der Merwe and De Villiers 2014). Wolfgat specialises in Westcoast dune produce.

During the visit, Kobus van der Merwe collaborated with Jan-Hendrik van der Westhuizen, chef-patron of a Michelin-starred restaurant named JAN, in Nice, France, where he celebrates South African cultural food in a fine dining environment. The meal began with a bread course of roosterbrood (flat pieces of yeast dough grilled on an open fire) served with melted butter, Kalahari raisins (*Grewia retinervis*) and crumbled bokkoms, a regional speciality of salted, dried mullet to dunk bread in.

Several small bites followed, including finely chopped klipmossel (limpets) cooked in white wine; a witmossel parfait; a choux bun filled with sweet-potato, cinnamon, and snoek (*Thysites atun* – snake mackerel, often smoked); and a savoury lamington – buttered white bread squares coated in biltong powder, sprinkled with dried mopani worm dust (see Figure 2). Scrubbed wooden tables overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, using seashells as crockery items and specifically designed cutlery (see the wooden dessert cutlery set in Figure 4) contributed to the West Coast aesthetic of the meal.

Figure 3 illustrates abalone with creamy pap (maize porridge), brakslaai (savoury crispy dune lettuce), Boerenkaas and pap wafers served in an abalone shell. The wafers resembled a sought-after delicacy in most South African households, the dry, crisp, caramelised bottom layer of pap that develops when maize meal is cooked slowly.

Four dishes followed: yellowtail fish with grapefruit, nasturtium and kruipvygie (*Jordaaniella cuprea* L.Bolus); a cheese course of frilly Tête de Moine cheese, apple and Saldanha Bay mussels; a Cape Bream and waterblommetjie (*Aponogeton distachyos*) dish (Figure 15); and the first of two dessert courses – a pear poached in Rooibos tea with smoked amasi (a fermented milk product) and a mabele crumble. Ting ya Mabele is a traditional fermented sorghum porridge eaten by Tswana people throughout South Africa and Botswana. The final dessert (Figure 4) reflected South Africans' penchant for canned guavas, served under a meringue dome with a sago pudding made with evaporated milk, garnished with edible flowers. Petit Fours were bars of fried fig and seeds. The meal was paired with local South African wines.



**Figure 2: Quartet of starters served after the bread course**



**Figure 3: Abalone, mieliepap and brakslaai**



**Figure 4: Guava and evaporated milk second dessert**

Please note that the researchers own copyright of Figures 2 to 19

**Leg 2:** Dispens, a small eatery and shop in Paternoster, derives its name from the Afrikaans words for pantry (die spens) but also a dispensary or pharmacy, and sold pickled waterblommetjies in jars. Waterblommetjie or Cape-pondweed (*Aponogeton distachyos*) is a native aquatic plant used to make a stew, typically with lamb or chicken, served with steamed rice. A pickled version is an innovative adaptation of a product with established cultural food heritage. Other products included snoek-flavoured salt (see Leg 1); dried Heerenbone (*Phaseolus lunatus*),





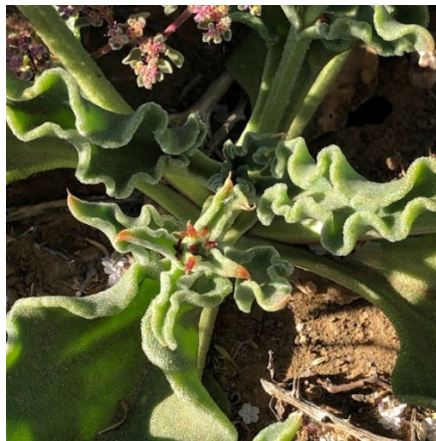
**Figure 8: *Hoodia gordonii* (Bitterghaap) preserve**

**Leg 4:** The day was spent in Prince Albert. A veld tour by indigenous veld experts introduced us to the flora of this specific area of the Karoo and we sampled many indigenous edibles, such as the tart red berries of the Kriedoring (*Lycium cinereum*) (Figure 9) and Soutslaai or the Common ice plant (*Mesembryanthemum crystallinum*) (Figure 10).

Dinner was Afrikaner heritage food eaten at the Karoo Kombuis, a restaurant in Prince Albert housed in a small period house of which the front rooms have been converted into a dining room. It offers a distinctly homely feel of Afrikaner culture.



**Figure 9: *Lycium cinereum* (Kriedoring)**



**Figure 10: *Mesembryanthemum crystallinum* (commonly known as Common Ice Plant or Soutslaai)**

**Leg 5:** A booked lunch at Grootbos Private Nature Reserve showcased many innovative uses of indigenous ingredients and heritage foods. The first course included sea pumpkin (*Prenia vanrensburgii* L.Bolus) and kolstert (blacktail) tartare, an espuma of dune spinach and a puffed sago wafer flavoured with buchu, served with Cape Malay pickled fish (Figure 11). The small soup course consisted of a marrow cappuccino with beef tartare on the side and black garlic mayonnaise; the cappuccino was lightly flavoured with Cape Snowbush (*Eriocephalus africanus*). Two courses thereafter featured local elements such as Mountain Sage (*Salvia chamelaeagnea*) with sous vide asparagus, garlic foam and confit yolk, as well as charred trout served with linguine and seaweed caviar. Main course was a braised oxtail kataifi with home-made ketchup and a coastal aniseed buchu (*Agathosma cerefolium*) foam (Figure 12). The dessert was a red chocolate sphere (resembling a planet), filled with canned guavas, a very traditional South African food heritage favourite (Figure 13), revealed when a hot nutmeg pelargonium (*Pelargonium fragrans*) custard was poured over.



**Figure 11:** Coastal Canapé: cured Kolstert with sea pumpkin tartare; oyster with dune spinach espuma and lemon pearls; Cape Malay pickled fish, buchu sago and curry oil



**Figure 12:** braised oxtail Kataifi with mushrooms, home-made ketchup and buchu foam



**Figure 13:** a chocolate sphere with poached guava and a nutmeg pelargonium custard

**Leg 6:** The Sustainability Institute outside Stellenbosch was our last destination. Their canteen, The Green Café, offers an indigenous salad featuring wild rosemary, wild sage, sunrose (*Aptenia cordifolia*) and spekboom (Figure 14). The kitchen gardens of Spier Wine Farm supplies produce like waterblommetjies (Figure 15) to various eateries on the estate.



Figure 14: Canteen wall advertisement for an indigenous salad at the Sustainability Institute



Figure 15: Waterblommetjies at Spier kitchen gardens

## 5. Discussion

The researchers followed the Heideggerian phenomenological research framework of a lived experience to highlight indigenous foods in eateries along a predetermined route. In context of the researchers' understanding of indigenous foods in relation to the hermeneutic circle (where it is not so much about acquiring new knowledge, but rather the world which has already been understood (Koch 1995)), the research proposed one cohesive experience synthesising different eating elements into one, paying particular attention to the cultural significance. By identifying examples of indigenous foods, we aimed to explore and examine their current availability and utilisation in eateries. Our experiences and the meaning-making that they informed are presented and discussed in the different Legs (see Table 1) of the route followed:

**Leg 1:** The way that restaurants approached indigenous food offerings during this leg of the tour illustrated several benefits for the restaurant, immediate society, broader society, and humanity. It was evident that eateries can situate themselves globally (Wolfgang previously won the best global destination restaurant award, and collaborated with a Michelin-starred chef, Jan-Hendrik van der Westhuizen). Local people benefit through employment, skills development, and by drawing attention to area-specific West Coast dune-sourced produce. Humanity benefits from increased awareness of the advantages indigenous foods can bring to the food production cycle.

**Leg 2:** The San centre's eatery demonstrated that the innovative application of indigenous foods is not the exclusive preserve of high-end restaurants. Visitors experience the use and meaning of indigenous foods in a culturally specific environment, that of the San people. Even at a road-side stall selling Bokkom sticks, the meaning of such a product in the immediate surrounding culture was evident. Bokkoms are a traditional West Coast product; a celebrity chef recently referred to bokkoms as 'the Parmesan of the West Coast'.

**Leg 3:** The African Relish Cookery School in Prince Albert is firmly rooted in the community and paid homage to traditional applications as well as innovative adaptations of indigenous foods, such as spekboom ice cream.

**Leg 4:** Eateries in the town of Prince Albert and surrounds appear to have a strong sense of the value and meaning of indigenous foods and cultural food for their visitors. This may be because the town has become a noted destination for visitors and people relocating from large cities. This could mean that the utilisation of indigenous foods is economically driven rather than for purely authentic cultural food experiences. Whatever

the reason, the town folk appear to have a deep understanding of the meaning of their fauna and flora in context of their specific regional food culture.

**Leg 5:** The meaning of applying indigenous foods may not be equally well understood at eateries across the industry. In the case of the Wolfgat/Klein JAN collaboration (see Leg 1), the innovative use of indigenous foods attracts diners seeking high end culinary experiences. However, a roosterkoek stall en route missed the opportunity to showcase South African indigenous foods in their fillings. Grootbos, a game reserve with accommodation and a restaurant, is ideally situated to use indigenous foods to cater for a broader audience who may not purposefully seek out foods that could challenge their taste buds. Although indigenous foods at Grootbos may be used differently from Wolfgat/Klein JAN, the same reasoning – to introduce eaters to a South African food culture and the use of indigenous foods – seems to apply.

**Leg 6:** The meaning of inclusion of indigenous foods at the Sustainability Institute is clear. The Institute's mandate is to promote sustainability by growing and using local plants, and although an attempt was made to include indigenous foods on the menu this is a working organisation's canteen, and the menu must meet the needs of employees and visitors. This poses some limitations and indigenous foods are therefore less pronounced on the menu. The meaning of indigenous foods is however clear, even though their availability may be limited for practical reasons.

Throughout the food tour many examples of indigenous foods unique to the area, such as the West Coast, the Karoo or coastal fynbos, were identified. Many common examples, such as the types of produce used or the dishes offered, were identified. In some instances, indigenous foods were not available in everyday eateries, for example the limited number of fillings at the roosterkoek stall. The use of indigenous foods appears restricted to specific eateries, and while this paucity of indigenous foods did not pose a problem during our food tour, it could mean less exposure and potential utilisation of indigenous foods in South Africa.

## 6. Conclusion and Further Research

This research shows that some eateries include indigenous foods on their menus, but in selected ways and mostly because they are known for using indigenous foods. The use of indigenous foods in the broader hospitality context appears limited. Our society needs a better understanding and endorsement of food nationalism as a concept, encouraging all food producers to adopt a different approach to promoting indigenous foods and crops, and building on traditional knowledge and technologies to produce a "local food plate" (Rampa et al. 2020). We need to create a positive attitude and secure environment within the hospitality industry to stimulate the inclusion, preparation, and service of indigenous foods in local eateries.

The following items should be highlighted. Some indigenous ingredients may only be **available** in certain areas, such as West Coast plants sourced through dune foraging at Wolfgat restaurant. Such area-specific ingredients cannot be used where they do not occur, and although they may be "free", they are seasonal. In contrast, a heritage food such as *askaek* with an indigenous food filling could be produced throughout the country and be an excellent vehicle to introduce unfamiliar indigenous ingredients in an affordable manner. **Affordability** is a critical consideration – although indigenous foraged ingredients may be inexpensive or even free, eateries using them innovatively may be expensive and out of the average consumer's reach. Their application as street food could make them much more widely utilised and consumed.

To address consumers' **unfamiliarity** with certain indigenous ingredients and foods, local consumers and food tourists should be exposed and educated about such foods in an affordable manner, perhaps by using indigenous foods as ingredients in street food. In terms of **sustainability**, ready availability is important for such foods to become mainstream, whether through improved agricultural practices or changes to food supply chains, research, education, and others.

Future research could include in-depth interviews with menu planners/designers, chefs, food retailers, farmers, food producers and others to determine their willingness to include indigenous foods, but also to address limitations and obstacles preventing increased use of indigenous foods. This could include advantages and disadvantages, for instance seasonal ingredients that require foraging, as well as how they believe offering indigenous foods could benefit the environment, food heritage, and food nationalism. Much like spekboom (see Leg 3 in the results section), a trendy ingredient used in soups, salads, stews, as a pickle and even smoothies (du Toit et al. 2023, Mahlanza et al. 2023), many other indigenous ingredients are still under-researched and could benefit from further culinary innovation. Further research on the palatability of indigenous foods is required, for

example Kriedoring (see Leg 4), a veld food eaten by locals from the Vanwyksvlei area despite the berries being bitter-tasting and not always considered edible (Van Wyk and De Beer 2022).

## 6.1 Ethics Approval

Ethics approval was obtained from NAS Ethics Committee, reference number NAS 134/2019.

## 6.2 Limitations

Despite the researchers' considerable understanding of broader South African food culture, both researchers are of the same cultural identity which could be considered a limitation. The "lived experience" aspect of the research would be strengthened by including participants from other South African cultures. Limited time and resources meant that the researchers were unable to conduct in-depth interviews, creating an opportunity for further research to be combined with research of additional historical documents on 'veldkos', to triangulate the data collected in this research. This research project concentrated on brick-and-mortar eateries and limited attention was given to street-food vendors, which also warrants further research.

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