

# Heritage-Themed Establishments as Identity Catalysts: A Food Tourism Case Study in Pampanga, Philippines

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**Abstract:** Pampanga, known as the culinary capital of the Philippines, showcases a gastronomic heritage deeply woven into Filipino cultural identity. Amid the pressures of urbanization and evolving tourism dynamics, culinary venues have emerged as dining spaces and cultural platforms promoting Kapampangan identity. This study examines how heritage-themed dining establishments in Pampanga employ heritage branding to enhance food tourism and attract domestic and international visitors. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research began with a survey to identify the most visited heritage-themed establishments and to understand tourists' motivations and satisfaction levels. These survey results helped pinpoint key cafés and restaurants that serve as cultural touchpoints. A complementary qualitative interview was then conducted with a Kapampangan cultural expert. The interview explored issues related to authenticity, branding, and cultural preservation from the perspective of one directly involved in heritage-based food culture. Tourist surveys also probed perceptions of culinary authenticity, satisfaction, and the importance of cultural ambiance and storytelling. Findings suggest that heritage-themed cafés and restaurants significantly enrich tourist experiences by offering authentic Kapampangan cuisine and immersive dining atmospheres. Tourists demonstrated strong preferences for culturally aesthetic environments and heritage-consistent menus, highlighting the effectiveness of heritage branding in responding to modern tourism expectations. However, the study also identifies ongoing challenges, such as maintaining cultural authenticity while ensuring commercial sustainability, and competing with mainstream or globalized dining alternatives. The study offers practical recommendations for enhancing institutional support and fostering collaborations between dining establishments, local cultural organizations, and government agencies. These strategies can strengthen heritage interpretation and promote Pampanga's position as a premier culinary heritage destination in the Philippines. As part of an ongoing case study, survey responses continue to be collected to support future iterations of this research and to monitor evolving tourist perceptions over time. Ultimately, this research contributes to the discourse on sustainable culinary tourism by illustrating how heritage-themed dining establishments can serve as gastronomic attractions and venues for cultural transmission and identity reinforcement.

**Keywords:** Heritage-Themed Dining, Kapampangan Cuisine, Cultural Branding, Food Tourism, Authenticity in Food Experience

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## 1. Introduction

Pampanga, located in Central Luzon, is widely regarded as the culinary capital of the Philippines. The province is known for its rich gastronomic traditions deeply rooted in local history and cultural identity. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in heritage-themed dining establishments – cafés and restaurants that consciously integrate cultural elements such as authentic Kapampangan dishes, traditional interior design, and storytelling into the dining experience. These establishments not only serve food but also function as spaces where heritage is communicated through cuisine, atmosphere, and curated cultural cues (Larsen, 2010; Kwan, 2024).

As culinary tourism continues to evolve, visitors increasingly seek not only to taste food but also to connect with the stories, aesthetics, and traditions behind it. This shift places heritage-themed dining at the intersection of cultural preservation and commercial appeal, where heritage is experienced as a multidimensional practice shaped by people, place, and legacy (Almansouri et al., 2021). At the same time, the growing popularity of food tourism presents challenges: establishments must balance authenticity and modern expectations, respond to shifting customer preferences, and navigate the pressure to create “Instagrammable” experiences without diluting cultural significance (Almansouri et al., 2022; Almansouri et al., 2023; Tvaltvadze, 2024).

This study investigates how tourists perceive their experiences in heritage-themed dining establishments in Pampanga. It aims to understand what attracts visitors to these establishments, how they evaluate authenticity, and what aesthetic and cultural elements influence their satisfaction. The study draws from survey data collected from visitors and content analysis of social media posts from these establishments to examine how visitors engage with heritage branding in the context of food tourism—an approach consistent with research emphasizing the role of online branding, curated digital narratives, and peer recommendations in shaping dining choices and tourism demand (Kwan, 2024; Tvaltvadze, 2024; Collado, 2025).

Specifically, this study aims to answer the question, “How do tourists perceive and evaluate their experiences in heritage-themed dining establishments in Pampanga, particularly about authenticity, satisfaction, and heritage branding?” From this main problem, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. What factors attract tourists to heritage-themed dining establishments in Pampanga?
2. How do tourists evaluate their satisfaction and perceived authenticity when dining in heritage-themed establishments?
3. How do tourists respond to and engage with the heritage branding elements promoted online by these establishments?
4. In what ways do aesthetic and cultural features shape tourist perceptions and overall dining experiences in the context of food tourism?

## **2. Related Literature**

### **2.1 Heritage Food: Concepts, Risks, and Safeguards**

Contemporary scholarship frames heritage food as a multidimensional construct anchored in legacy, people, and place, with interlocking sensory, symbolic, and procedural attributes (Almansouri et al., 2021). Empirical validation with culinary professionals highlights that authenticity is a socially negotiated, evolving practice: risk factors extend beyond recipe deviation to include adaptation to customer preferences, ingredient cost/availability, non-local chef backgrounds, and operational pressures that may alter taste and texture (Almansouri et al., 2022; Almansouri et al., 2023). Across these studies, recurring threats involve modernized tools that alter sensory outcomes, ingredient substitutions, and shortcuts in technique/sequence, while safeguards emphasize cook expertise, documented methods, and provenance-linked ingredients (Almansouri et al., 2022; Almansouri et al., 2023).

### **2.2 Measuring Gastronomic Heritage Quality**

Methodologically, the Assessment of Gastronomic Heritage Quality framework aligns hygiene–sanitation controls with the sensory and symbolic characteristics of typical dishes in traditional restaurants, documenting recipes, tools, temperatures, and cultural cues (Uggioni, Proença, and Zeni 2010). While such controls protect safety and consistency, scholars caution that strict compliance can unintentionally pressure changes that risk heritage loss—hence the need to codify non-negotiables (core techniques, essential ingredients, flavour benchmarks) alongside regulatory requirements (Uggioni, Proença, and Zeni, 2010; Almansouri et al., 2023).

### **2.3 Performing Heritage: Space, Story, and Ambience**

Beyond the kitchen, heritage is performed through space, service, and narrative. Dining rooms become stages where place-based stories, terroir, and playful nostalgia co-produce meaning with cuisine; the ethnography of Restaurant noma illustrates how design, sourcing, and service choreography enact a “tasty heritage” that fuses innovation with locality (Larsen, 2010). This helps explain why ambience, design, and storytelling weigh heavily in visitor perceptions of authenticity in heritage-themed venues.

### **2.4 Digital Mediation, Awareness, and Destination Branding**

Digital channels shape the entire visitor journey—from awareness and pre-visit expectations to post-visit narration. Case work in Shunde, Guangdong Province, China, demonstrates how curated décor, seasonal/local menus, and interpretive service align sensory quality with regional identity in a hotel-restaurant setting (Kwan, 2024). A Helsinki trend study similarly highlights interior aesthetics, soundscape, friendly service, sustainability cues, and online branding as key touchpoints in contemporary dining decisions (Tvaltvadze, 2024). Event-based evidence from Bogotá demonstrates that gastronomic festivals can catalyse attendance, sales, and exhibitor participation, supporting destination reactivation and even MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions) spillovers (Cárdenas Gómez and Ovalle Carrillo, 2023). Complementarily, conference research on food bloggers/influencers shows they provide visual social proof and narrative cues that can increase visitor inflow and spend, while raising risks around dependency, overtourism, and authenticity pressure—issues directly relevant to heritage cafés’ reliance on visual storytelling (Collado, 2025).

## 2.5 Indigenous Foods, Routes, and Methods

Tourism research using lived experience models and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) documents how diners make meaning from encounters with indigenous foods in commercial eateries; a Western Cape food-tour study demonstrates that place, sourcing, and narrative jointly anchor perceived authenticity and that programmed routes/itineraries are effective interpretive formats—an approach transferable to heritage-dining trails (Fisher and du Rand, 2024). Relatedly, a historical review argues that culinary innovation in practice is often unstructured, revealing a gap between academic research and gastro-tourism operations and calling for industry–academia collaboration to align innovation with heritage and sustainability (Fisher and du Rand, 2023).

## 2.6 Preservation, Digitization, and Intangible Heritage

Work on digitizing ritual food heritage reveals that inventories, multimedia documentation, and public platforms (often facilitated by municipal/cultural bodies) can safeguard intangible practices while facilitating tourism access. This Portuguese case underscores the importance of capacity and the benefits of video-first formats and social channels in expanding reach and engagement (Ramazanov et al., 2022). For destinations like Pampanga, such digitization underpins credible heritage branding, supports staff training, and provides reusable interpretive assets.

These insights directly inform the current study’s focus on branding, ambience, and authenticity tensions in Pampanga’s heritage-themed cafés and restaurants.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative-descriptive case study to examine how visitors perceive and evaluate heritage-themed dining in Pampanga. A case approach is suitable for understanding experience in context and for integrating multiple evidence streams consistent with venue-level studies of dining culture and branding (Kwan, 2024; Tvaltvadze, 2024) and with gastronomy research that documents practices alongside perceptions (Uggioni, Proença, and Zeni, 2010; Fisher and du Rand, 2024).

### 3.2 Data Sources and Procedures

#### 3.2.1 Tourist Survey

A structured survey (Microsoft Forms) targeted individuals who had visited heritage-themed cafés/restaurants in Pampanga. The instrument captured demographics, awareness channels, motivations, satisfaction, and perceptions of authenticity/branding. The survey link was disseminated through the researchers’ networks and online channels, and respondents answered it on a voluntary basis. As of the time of writing, 349 valid responses were recorded; responses were treated as valid if the questionnaire was substantially completed and the visitation-frequency item indicated at least one visit (i.e., any option from “first time” to “daily”). Although no separate screening item was used, the visitation-frequency item implicitly indicates that respondents had at least one visit.

#### 3.2.2 Digital Content Analysis

Public social-media posts and promotional materials of the most-visited establishments (as identified by the survey) were reviewed. The aim was to examine how heritage cues are presented online and how these may influence awareness and expectations. Prior work shows that curated décor, seasonal/local sourcing, and online presence co-produce a venue’s cultural identity (Kwan, 2024); that interior aesthetics, soundscape, service tone, sustainability cues, and online branding steer dining choices (Tvaltvadze, 2024); and that programmed gastronomic content amplified via social media drives audience reach and intent (Cárdenas Gómez and Ovalle Carrillo, 2023).

#### 3.2.3 Key Informant Interview

To deepen the interpretation of culinary authenticity and preservation, a semi-structured interview was conducted with Mr. Ruston Banal (artist, cultural advocate, and former tourism officer). His insights on “food grammar,” evolving authenticity, and documentation gaps contextualize how Kapampangan cuisine is

understood locally. The key-informant data were obtained through voice recordings sent via private messaging. The respondent spoke in a mix of Kapampangan and English, reflecting natural conversational practice. The recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, while the text used in the body was translated into English by the researcher whenever necessary. The value of expert and situated perspectives in linking place, sourcing, and narrative to perceived authenticity is reflected in interpretive work on food tours and indigenous foods (Fisher and du Rand, 2024), as well as in venue-level case studies that connect décor, menu, and service to local identity (Kwan, 2024).

### 3.3 Analysis

- Survey data were summarized using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and mean satisfaction scores) to profile visitors, rank motivations, and assess branding influence and perceived authenticity risks. This approach mirrors quantitative treatments used to validate heritage-food attributes and risk factors (Almansouri et al., 2022; Almansouri et al., 2023) and to assess gastronomic quality dimensions (Uggioni, Proença, and Zeni, 2010).
- Digital content was analysed thematically to identify branding and interpretation patterns (e.g., heritage symbols, spatial cues, plating aesthetics, provenance claims). The choice of themes follows venue/destination studies that connect ambience and online presentation to visitor expectations and satisfaction (Kwan, 2024; Tvaltvadze, 2024; Cárdenas Gómez and Ovalle Carrillo, 2023).
- Interview data were organized into analytic memos (authenticity anchors, adaptation boundaries, and documentation needs) and used to contextualize survey and content findings, akin to interpretive approaches that relate place–sourcing–narrative to perceived authenticity (Fisher and du Rand, 2024).

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Survey Results

#### 4.1.1 Tourist Profile

Respondents were predominantly under 20 years old (254; 72.8%), followed by those aged 20–29 (85; 24.4%), 30–39 (7; 2.0%), 40–49 (1; 0.3%), and 50 and above (2; 0.6%). By gender, women (227; 65.0%) outnumbered men (110; 31.5%), with non-binary individuals (4; 1.1%) and those who prefer not to say (8; 2.3%) comprising the remainder. Most respondents were local residents of Pampanga (302; 86.5%), with domestic visitors from other Philippine regions (47; 13.5%) forming a smaller share. In terms of visitation frequency, patterns indicate regular but not frequent engagement: first-time (34; 9.7%), occasional, 1–3×/year (187; 53.6%), seasonal, 4–6×/year (70; 20.1%), monthly (46; 13.2%), weekly (12; 3.4%), and daily (0; 0%). These distributions suggest that heritage-themed venues are especially salient to younger, local visitors who engage periodically rather than habitually.

#### 4.1.2 Visitor Motivations and Attractions

Updated results indicate that visitors were primarily motivated by authentic Kapampangan cuisine (213; 31%) and historical/cultural ambience (176; 25%). Visual appeal remained a strong draw, with Instagrammable/aesthetic environments (134; 19%) ranking third. Social proof also played a significant role: recommendations from others (125; 18%) influenced nearly one-fifth of respondents, while curiosity about local culinary traditions (50; 7%) played a smaller, yet notable, role.

#### 4.1.3 Satisfaction Ratings

Tourists consistently reported high satisfaction across all experience dimensions. The top-rated aspects were the heritage-themed interior and ambience (4.41/5), followed by the presentation and aesthetics of the dishes (4.38) and the variety of menu offerings (4.38). Taste (4.36) and quality of service (4.36) were likewise strong. Slightly lower—but still positive—scores were given to the use of authentic/local ingredients (4.34) and Instagrammable areas/backgrounds (4.31). The lowest rating was staff knowledge of heritage topics (4.10).

#### 4.1.4 *Appreciation of Heritage*

Most visitors reported that their dining experience deepened their appreciation of Kapampangan heritage, with responses of “yes, significantly” (184; 53%) and “yes, somewhat” (125; 36%), totalling 309 (89%). Smaller shares were “neutral” (31; 9%) and “not really” (8; 2%), while “not at all” (0; 0%) was not selected.

#### 4.1.5 *Awareness and Branding Influence*

For awareness sources (multi-select), respondents most often learned about heritage-themed venues via social media (253; 40.16%) and recommendations from friends/family (256; 40.63%), followed by online reviews (54; 8.57%), travel websites/blogs (34; 5.40%), and local tourism promotions (33; 5.24%). Regarding the influence of branding on venue choice, responses clustered toward importance, with “extremely important” (144; 41.26%) and “somewhat important” (121; 34.67%) totalling 265 (75.93%). Fewer respondents chose “neutral” (78; 22.35%), with minimal indications of low importance—“somewhat not important” (5; 1.43%) and “extremely not important” (1; 0.29%).

#### 4.1.6 *Perceived Authenticity Risks*

For factors that might affect authenticity (multi-select), respondents most frequently cited modernized cooking methods (192; 31%), followed by substitution of traditional ingredients (116; 19%) and adjustments to tourists’ taste preferences (116; 19%). Other notable concerns were foreign influence in food preparation (105; 17%) and lack of culinary knowledge among chefs (84; 14%).

#### 4.1.7 *Recommendation and Revisit Intentions*

An overwhelming majority indicated they would recommend heritage-themed dining to others: Yes (343; 98.28%) vs. No (6; 1.72%). Likelihood to revisit was likewise strong: “Definitely” (229; 65.62%), “Probably” (104; 29.80%), “Unsure” (15; 4.30%), “Probably not” (1; 0.29%), and “Definitely not” (0; 0.00%).

## 4.2 **Content Analysis**

To supplement the survey findings, a content analysis was conducted on the social media accounts and online presence of the three heritage-themed dining establishments that were most frequently mentioned in the survey: Aling Lucing, Singkù Café, and Silung Coffee. This analysis examined how these establishments present their heritage branding, aesthetic appeal, and culinary authenticity through their respective social media accounts.

### 4.2.1 *Aling Lucing*

Aling Lucing’s Facebook page prominently highlights its legacy as the originator of sisig, with frequent references to its founder and the historical significance of its recipes. The establishment’s signature presentation, sisig served on a hot sizzling plate (a plate made of cast-iron), is repeatedly shown online and functions as a recognizable visual maker of authenticity. Sisig is widely recognized as Pampanga’s signature contribution to Filipino cuisine, and Aling Lucing’s branding consistently positions the dish as part of its origin-story identity. Their Facebook posts, such as their 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration and a CNN feature with the founder’s granddaughter, underscore their heritage narrative. Visuals often depict rustic dining settings, reinforcing a sense of tradition and continuity. It also highlights the original branch’s modest setting and open layout, reflecting a no-frills dining environment associated with ordinary, everyday dining in Pampanga, and in the Philippines more broadly, depicting a typical *carinderia*. In this study, an open-air *carinderia* refers to a simple, casual eatery with a partly open structure, basic seating, and a community dining atmosphere, features that reinforce perceptions of tradition and continuity.

### 4.2.1 *Singkù Café*

Singkù Café uses the tagline “Celebrating Coffee & Culture” and showcases its role as a cultural space through event promotions and collaborations with local artists. Its Instagram page emphasizes its aesthetic appeal, featuring posts that showcase vintage interiors, cultural exhibits, and heritage-inspired drinks. A notable example is a café tour reel that introduces their barista, reinforcing both personal connection and brand authenticity.

#### 4.2.1 *Silung Coffee*

Silung Coffee projects a serene, rustic atmosphere grounded in Filipino hospitality. Social Media content often includes bamboo and wood-accented interiors, native materials, and lush greenery, not to mention that the establishment is situated in the old municipal building of Mabalacat City. Posts highlight local coffee blends and dishes, while captions reference comfort and tradition, positioning the space as a modern retreat rooted in cultural identity.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Why Tourists Choose Heritage Dining: Authenticity, Culture, Aesthetics

The top visit drivers were authentic Kapampangan cuisine (31%), historical/cultural ambience (25%), and Instagrammable/aesthetic environments (19%). This blend demonstrates that visitors seek a multisensory heritage experience—credible flavours rooted in place, presented within visually legible spaces. This aligns with studies showing that heritage is performed through cuisine, space, and narrative (Larsen, 2010), and with venue cases where curated décor, local/seasonal menus, and interpretive service convert locality into a coherent identity (Kwan, 2024). Contemporary dining research confirms that interior aesthetics, soundscape, and online branding now function as decision cues alongside food quality (Tvaltvadze, 2024).

### 5.2 How Visitors Judge the Experience: Satisfaction and Authenticity

Satisfaction was consistently high: heritage-themed interior/ambience (4.41/5), presentation/aesthetics (4.38), variety (4.38), taste (4.36), service (4.36), with authentic/local ingredients (4.34) close behind. The lower score for staff heritage knowledge (4.10) indicates an interpretive gap: ambience and plating communicate heritage implicitly, but explicit cultural interpretation is thinner. This pattern mirrors heritage-quality assessments where sensory excellence leads, while cultural explanation lags (Uggioni, Proença, and Zeni, 2010). Perceived authenticity risks reported by visitors—modernized tools (31%), ingredient substitutions (19%), adjustments to tourist tastes (19%), foreign influence (17%), and chef knowledge gaps (14%)—track validated risk factors in the heritage-food literature (Almansouri et al., 2022; Almansouri et al., 2023). The literature’s consensus is that authenticity is dynamic and socially negotiated; adaptation is feasible if venues safeguard core flavour memory, key method sequences, and provenance (Almansouri et al. 2021; 2022; 2023). Practically, Assessment of Gastronomic Heritage Quality (AQHQ)-style documentation of non-negotiables can strike a balance between safety, consistency, and cultural fidelity (Uggioni, Proença, and Zeni, 2010).

### 5.3 How Online Branding Shapes Choices: Posts, Reviews, and Reach

Branding clearly works as a decision heuristic: 41.26% rated it extremely important and 34.67% somewhat important (76% combined), while awareness was led by recommendations (~40.63%) and social media (~40.16%), followed by online reviews (8.57%) and travel sites/blogs (5.40%). This matches evidence that digital channels pre-shape expectations and channel demand (Kwan, 2024; Tvaltvadze, 2024). The exceptionally high cultural appreciation gains (89% significant/somewhat) suggest that once branding brings visitors in, the on-site experience reinforces identity, turning digital promise into cultural learning.

### 5.4 How Space and Symbols Shape the Meal: Aesthetics in Action

Aesthetic and cultural features shape judgments before, during, and after the meal. Before: imagery of interiors, plating, and symbols primes visitors to expect “heritage” (Tvaltvadze, 2024). During: diners read ambience, sourcing claims, and service tone as cultural signifiers (Larsen, 2010; Kwan, 2024). After: visuals and narratives fuel post-visit narration (reviews, posts), extending the venue’s heritage story online (Tvaltvadze, 2024). Tour-based work demonstrates that place, sourcing, and narrative jointly anchor perceived authenticity (Fisher and du Rand, 2024), and that route/itinerary formats can scaffold interpretation—suggesting that a heritage café trail in Pampanga could enhance meaning-making. These results indicate that designed cultural cues (Kapampangan indigenous script “Kulitan” motifs, rustic materials, and provenance notes) and clear stories (menu language and QR-linked dish histories) are not peripheral; they are core contributors to satisfaction and cultural value.

## 5.5 Qualitative Insights

These findings are further enriched by insights from cultural expert Mr. Ruston Banal, who emphasized that Kapampangan food authenticity extends beyond recipes to include social rituals such as “food grammar.” In his account, food grammar refers to the culturally expected structure of a Kapampangan table—the assumption that a complete meal is built through a patterned combination of components: a soup or broth, a dipping sauce, vegetables, and entrée, rather than a single dish served in isolation. Banal describes this as a culturally “complete” table: “when we are serving food on the table... you have *sabo* (soup/broth) to slurp, you have *tiltilan* (dipping sauce) to dip your food in, and then you have vegetables as part of your viand, and then you have the entrée or the main dish” (Banal, personal communication, April 1, 2025). Framed this way, authenticity is not only a matter of whether a dish follows a correct recipe, but also whether a meal “reads” as culturally coherent to those socialized within the tradition. This helps contextualize why authenticity is highly localized and evolving: the “rules” of the table are shaped by family practice, community memory, and changing circumstances over time (Almansouri et al., 2021; Almansouri et al., 2022; Almansouri et al., 2023).

Within this broader experience, cultural authenticity remains central to tourist evaluation. High ratings for taste and ambiance indicate that visitors judge authenticity through both sensory satisfaction and the dining environment. Banal’s concept of “food grammar” helps interpret this pattern: even when visitors focus on presentation and flavor, the experience is strengthened when the meal implicitly aligns with the expected structure of Kapampangan dining, which he describes as a shared language of food that cuts across social classes and reinforces Kapampangan identity. He explains that this structure is widely shared: “Despite what social class you belong to, that’s the authentic Kapampangan” (Banal, personal communication, April 1, 2025). In this sense, the establishments’ strongest “heritage performance” is achieved not only through décor or branding, but through making the meal feel culturally complete and recognizable.

However, the notion of authenticity is complex and contested. As Banal notes, no single version of a dish represents a fixed cultural truth. Authenticity is highly localized, with each family or barrio having their own iterations of the same dish. As he puts it, “even within a barrio (village) or even within a town, there are nuances when cooking a certain type of dish... every family has their own version of... *sisig*... *kare-kare*... *asado*” (Banal, personal communication, April 1, 2025). Migration, technological advancement, and changing lifestyles continue to alter culinary traditions. He critiques the term “authenticity” as a colonial construct and instead suggests that true cultural continuity exists in the inherited methods practiced within families and communities. This is consistent with survey findings that recognize modern cooking tools as risks to authenticity yet also reveal that non-local diners may not be able to detect these differences due to varying taste memories. Banal notes that modern equipment “affects the taste, the memory of taste... because it’s not the same way a pork or a chicken is cooked” (Banal, personal communication, April 1, 2025). What is important is that, despite the advancements in culinary technology, the so-called “memory of taste,” the traditional taste profile as how locals recall it, must be established to authenticate these dishes.

The role of chefs and establishments, therefore, is to strike a balance between honouring their cultural roots and creating dishes that are both visually and gastronomically appealing to a broad audience. Banal advocates for a collaborative model where heirloom flavours are preserved while the presentation is adapted for aesthetic appeal, especially for modern or foreign diners who expect visual refinement. He frames the balance clearly: “you have the traditional heirloom dishes... and as a chef, you may want to elevate this dish... [by] retaining... the taste... then... make it attractive on the plate” (Banal, personal communication, April 1, 2025). Social media analysis confirms this trend, showing that tourists are drawn to Instagrammable design elements and storytelling through visual appeal, ambiance, and branding.

Importantly, the discussion highlights the lack of documentation as a key vulnerability in heritage preservation. Banal emphasizes the importance of cataloguing culinary knowledge and community best practices – whether through personal inventories, academic studies, or digital archives – to ensure continuity. Banal emphasizes that “the missing piece is documentation,” arguing for a “mapping and inventory of that particular dish at a certain period of time” so records “stay” even as recipes evolve (Banal, personal communication, April 1, 2025). As food becomes increasingly influenced by global exposure and digital representation, the provenance and historical roots of regional dishes risk being lost or diluted.

This study reaffirms that heritage-themed dining establishments in Pampanga are not merely commercial ventures – they are cultural sites where memory, identity, and innovation converge. By acknowledging the multiplicity of authentic expressions, understanding visitor expectations, and supporting efforts to document

and preserve culinary knowledge, stakeholders can ensure that food tourism remains both culturally meaningful and sustainably appealing.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study examined the role of heritage-themed dining establishments in Pampanga in contributing to food tourism by providing culturally rich, aesthetically immersive, and gastronomically satisfying experiences. Through surveys, content analysis, and expert interviews, it was found that tourists are primarily attracted to the authenticity of Kapampangan cuisine and the establishment's visual appeal. Satisfaction was highest when cultural immersion and culinary excellence intersected, reinforcing the importance of traditional taste, ambiance, and heritage branding.

However, the research also revealed tensions between modern expectations and traditional practices. Tourists, particularly younger and non-local audiences, appreciate Instagrammable aesthetics and modernized dining spaces, which establishments often balance with cultural motifs and storytelling. Expert insights underscored that while culinary traditions evolve, preserving the inherited taste and structure of Kapampangan meals remains central to authenticity. The lack of systematic documentation, however, poses a threat to the continuity of heritage.

As Pampanga continues to position itself as a premier culinary destination, this study underscores the importance of collaborative efforts among cultural workers, tourism stakeholders, and food entrepreneurs. These efforts must ensure that innovation enhances rather than erases the cultural foundations of the cuisine. By integrating authentic culinary practices with thoughtful branding and storytelling, heritage-themed establishments can play a lasting role in reinforcing Filipino identity through food tourism.

## **7. Recommendations**

Based on the findings and expert insights from this study, the following recommendations are proposed to support the continued development of heritage-themed dining establishments as pillars of sustainable food tourism in Pampanga:

Cultural workers, local government units, and educational institutions should collaborate to document heirloom recipes and cooking practices. Creating a local archive or digital repository of Kapampangan culinary traditions can help safeguard authenticity across generations.

Establishments should continue to invest in aesthetic elements that reflect Kapampangan heritage, such as traditional décor, menu design, and plating styles, while leveraging social media to share meaningful cultural stories behind their dishes.

Service staff can act as cultural ambassadors by being trained to communicate the historical and cultural background of featured dishes. This adds depth to the dining experience and supports educational tourism.

Chefs should be encouraged to innovate in presentation and format while retaining the flavor profiles and structure that reflect the Kapampangan "food grammar." A balance between creativity and preservation can attract a broader tourist base without compromising authenticity.

Partnerships among tourism offices, heritage institutions, and food entrepreneurs can ensure that marketing strategies and tourism promotions align with the goals of heritage preservation. Events such as food festivals and guided culinary tours may reinforce Pampanga's brand as a heritage food destination.

The study's primary limitation was the inability to include direct input from establishment owners or managers. This was mitigated by triangulating survey data with a broad content analysis of online materials, allowing for a visitor-centred perspective that captures both firsthand experiences and public representations. Further studies may explore these limitations in greater depth.

## **Ethics Declaration**

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Only public digital materials were analysed. As an ongoing case, the survey remains open to receive additional responses, supporting comparisons over time (cf. event/destination monitoring in Cárdenas Gómez and Ovalle Carrillo, 2023).

## AI Declaration

This study utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools, including ChatGPT-5 and Grammarly, primarily to refine the grammatical structure and clarity of the paper. ChatGPT-5 was utilized for linguistic refinement, sentence restructuring, and coherence enhancement, with prompts such as “improve the readability of this phrase without changing the idea or the message.” Grammarly further assisted in proofreading and syntax corrections. Nevertheless, all research, analysis, and interpretation remain the product of the author's critical engagement with gathered data.

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