

The Demand for Local Food in Five-and Four-Star Hotels in Sri Lanka from the Perception of Sri Lankan Chefs

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A B S T R A C T

Food is an important part of tourism, as all tourists seek to consume various food at any destination. The cultural food in Sri Lanka has a higher value compared with other countries. Local food vendors are contributing to producing healthier food while maintaining the quality of the food during the pandemic. Therefore, the study focuses on the demand for local food in five- and four-star hotels in Sri Lanka from the perception of Sri Lankan chefs. A qualitative study has been undertaken using purposive sampling with 10 chefs, who specialize in local food, as respondents, and thematic analysis was used. Based on the research outcomes the researcher has identified five themes. In-depth interviews were held and the study found that there is a high demand for local food among international travelers, and the reason that the majority of the tourists visit Sri Lanka is mainly to experience the spices used in local food. Local food also has good health benefits and has a good taste compared to other food. Local food is spicier and has various flavors that are added to the food with the spices used, and each dish can be cooked in different styles. The government and tourism development bodies should be involved in the collaboration of local food suppliers to promote local food among tourists and the standard of delivery.

Keywords: COVID 19, Local food, Sri Lankan chefs

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1. Introduction

Food tourism is the fastest-growing sector in the hospitality and tourism industry in Sri Lanka. Culinary and gastronomy are the two main concepts when it comes to food tourism. Food is an important part of tourism because all tourists seek to consume a wide range of food at any destination. The cultural food in Sri Lanka has a very rich value when compared to other countries. Chefs and food makers are contributing to developing healthier food by maintaining the quality of the food. The food consumption of tourists has largely been neglected in hospitality and tourism literature (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). The contribution of food to tourism has been largely ignored despite its apparent importance and potential (Du Rand, G. E., Heath, E., & Alberts, N., 2013). Tourists' spending on food makes up one-third of total travel expenditure, which also reflects the importance of food consumption in tourism (Telfer & Wall, 2000). In recent years, food tourism has shown considerable growth and has become one of the most dynamic and creative segments in tourism. Both destinations and tourism companies are aware of the importance of gastronomy in order to diversify tourism and stimulate local, regional, and national economic development. Furthermore, food tourism includes in its discourse ethical and sustainable values based on the territory, the landscape, the sea, local culture, local products, and authenticity, which is something it has in common with current trends of cultural consumption. It is recognized that the kind of food and drinks on offer for tourists can have major implications for the economic, cultural, and environmental sustainability of tourism destinations, with researchers arguing that a focus on locally sourced products can result in benefits for both hosts and guests (Sims, 2009). Gastronomic tourism is as similar to "food tourism" in involving travel for food but is also presented as an emerging discipline recognizing both gastronomy and tourism as dynamic cultural constructions reflecting specific histories and contemporary interests (Cohen, 2004). While the role of food in tourism has long antecedents, as a tourism product being deliberately generated by those responsible for marketing destinations, gastronomic tourism is a relatively new form of tourism. With the incorporation of the principles of gastronomy, as a subset of culinary tourism previously based upon recipes 'traditional' to given locations, gastronomic tourism is a subset of cultural tourism. This is particularly true when the dining experience on offer is contextualized within attempts to replicate traditions of architecture, hosting and practice, for example in modes of toasting guests and hosts (Chaney & Ryan, 2012).

Culinary tourism is mainly focused on food as an attraction for exploration and a destination for tourism. Although food has always been a part of hospitality services for tourists, it was not emphasized by the tourism industry until the late 1990s. It now includes a variety of formats and products – culinary trails, cooking classes, restaurants, farm weekends, cookbooks, food guides, and new or adapted recipes, dishes, and even ingredients. While much culinary tourism focuses on the experience of dining and tasting new food as a commercial enterprise, it is also an educational initiative channeling curiosity about food into learning through it about the culture of a particular cuisine, the people involved in producing and preparing it, the food system enabling access to that food, and the potential contribution of tourists to sustainability (Long, 2004).

2. Research problem

Food tourism involves visits to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants, and specific locations for which food tasting and/or the features of a specialized food manufacturing region are considered to be food tourism (Kim et al., 2003).

This study has mainly focused on identifying the Sri Lankan chefs' perceptions of local food in Sri Lanka. Many studies have investigated to find the perception of travelers or guests. Fewer studies have been conducted to identify the chefs' perceptions of local food in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this study has been conducted to fulfill the theoretical and knowledge gaps. A chef's perception of food is essential for marketing their product to the customers. Hence, this study aims to investigate the demand for local food in five and four-star hotels in Sri Lanka from the perceptions of Sri Lankan chefs. By reviewing the existing literature on demand for local food and local food perceptions, researchers have identified the following research questions and expect to answer the following questions under this study.

RQ1: What is the current demand for local food in 5-star and 4-star hotels in Sri Lanka?

RQ2: What are the key strategies which can be adapted to enhance the local food demand in 5-star and 4-star hotels in Sri Lanka?

This study helps stakeholders in hospitality and tourism, as well as academics, understand the need for local cuisine. Therefore, based on the previous literature and research questions this study has objectives designed as follows:

RO1: Examine the current demand for the local food in 5-star and 4-star hotels in Sri Lanka

RQ2: Examine the key strategies which can be adapted to enhance the local food demand in 5-star and 4-star hotels in Sri Lanka

3. Review of the relevant literature

Most tourists are visiting destinations for leisure purposes. Those leisure tourists are searching for local cultural things during their tours. Local food is a major component of tourism because it can provide a local culture, values, norms of the society, etc. "Any tourism experience in which one learns about appreciates or consumes branded local sources", in this perspective local food is becoming an important part of the cultural character of the destination.

In addition to meeting physical need, local food consumption also provides a chance to learn about local geography, individuals, and culture (Sengel et al., 2015 pg 340). Further, local food is an essential part of the tourism experience since it can serve both as a cultural and entertainment activity (Hjalager and Richards, 2002). In a sense creating a destination image via locality of food is considered an important factor in national cultural identity and destination promotion (McKercher et al., 2008). Tourists have different choices when they select food, the selection differs according to their culture, society, religion, age, social status, health conditions, etc. In food tourism, there must be a differentiation between the behaviours of tourists who consume food as a part of their travel experience and those who select destinations solely influenced by their interest in food (Hall et al., 2004). Increasing tourist consumption of local foods can generate a multiplier effect that will benefit the local economy (Sims, 2009). Sri Lanka is also well known for unique and authentic traditional food varieties which have recently initiated a focus on contributing to developing and promoting gastronomy tourism. (P.W.T.A.Fernando, A.C.I.D.Karunaratne, M.M.G.K.Marasisinghe, 2022)

Local can be understood either in terms of a bounded region within which products are produced and sold, and terms "specialty" or "locality" food as intended as value-added products for export to other countries or regions (Sims, 2009). Local food holds much potential to enhance sustainability in tourism, whereby the tourism planner and the entrepreneur should

work hand in hand to satisfy the consumers; contribute to the authenticity of the destination; strengthen the local economy; and provide for the environmentally-friendly infrastructure, including the ways and means by which food resources, both local and imported, are handled (Du Rand et al., 2013).

Food and tourism had been identified as two different tourist market segments based on the motive of food consumption viz., those who use food as a part of their tour and those whose almost everything on the tour including the selection of tour itinerary depended on the interest of the food. (Laksiri, 2019). Food is recognized as a reflection of the nature of the residence and the host culture (Du Rand, G. & Hearth, 2006).

Destinations are increasingly using food as a strategic tool to differentiate themselves from competitive destinations and broaden their inbound tourism market (Mckercher, B., Okumus, F., & Okumus, 2008). Food influences guest satisfaction, and it can be used as a critical differentiator. Ultimately foods help in developing destination brand identity and provide means to experience and understand the local culture (Laksiri, 2019). Food is a complicated and challenging element in the tourism experience since it is producing nutritious, hygienic, accessible, and culturally acceptable food to tourists. He has recognized both positive and negative dimensions of foods. Tourist decisions on food will be made with much care as it involves more risk than experiencing the other attributes of tourism. As Cohen points out "eating or drinking, activities mediated by taste, involve the body directly with the environment and hence pose a potential risk... in extreme cases may mean the difference between life and death" (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). Some tourists are adventurous, and frequently they demand local food and are reluctant to eat the food from their own cultures while traveling; even in this segment, there can be a certain amount of neophobia particularly when they visit third world countries (Cohen & Avieli, 2004).

Among the large variety of food and food-related activities available at the destination, very few of them will be important for tourism, and those few will determine the authenticity of the food in the destination. While adapting local dishes to foreign tastes, such establishments also create new dishes, creating an embryonic tourist cuisine (Laksiri, 2019).

According to literature, local food creates a unique experience for the guest, because while consuming local foods at a destination the guest can have learned the local culture, norms, traditions, beliefs of the society, and specific health benefits of local ingredients and foods. Local foods added value to the destinations. With that, local destinations can be more popular in the tourism sector, because each year the highest number of tourists visit countries for pleasure, and pleasure travellers seek novel experiences in their destination. Therefore, local food provides the unique experience that they are looking for at the destinations.

4. Methods

This study focuses on examining the demand for local food in five- and four-star hotels in Sri Lanka from the perception of Sri Lankan Chefs. The study was based on the four-star and five-star hotels in Sri Lanka and the population of this study was chefs in Sri Lanka. To achieve the research objectives, ten Sri Lankan chefs were selected as the sample. The sampling was done using purposive sampling techniques. The study has been conducted during the COVID 19 pandemic situation. Due to the COVID 19 third wave, the operations of the tourism and hospitality business drastically dropped. Therefore, the study sample was limited to ten. To gain the primary data, the researcher used the interview method intending to gain perceptions regarding the demand for local food in five-star and four-star hotels in Sri Lanka and conducted

face-to-face interviews with 10 chefs. This study was based on the qualitative research approach and the collected data was analysed by using the thematic analysis method. Following the past works of literature, respondents were asked open-ended questions to gather information for the research.

5. Data analysis

Sri Lanka is a country that has many religions and cultures. Sri Lankan food culture is different from region to region and religion to religion. The majority of the tourists are trying to get different food experiences on their tours. Also, they are willing to get the experience of the local food culture with the local people. Only a few tourists who are from Asian countries have spicy local food and others are trying to have mildly spicy or nonspicy food.

The research findings based on the research objectives have been analyzed by the researcher. To obtain the data researcher used three open-ended questions. According to the research objectives and findings of the interview three themes were developed.

Table 1: Theme Summary

Objective	Themes
Examine the current demand for the local food in 5-star and 4-star hotels in Sri Lanka	1. Local Food 2. Health Benefits 3. Current Demand

5.1. Findings pertaining to the meaning of local food

Local food reflects the authenticity of a country. Without authenticity and the local culture, there is no local food. One of the chefs interviewed revealed that “it is reflecting the authenticity of the country”. Authentic food means food that has not been altered and also it is much broader than food fraud. Authentic food is prepared in a specific country based on their tradition and culture. Another interviewed chef said that “when we are talking about the local the authenticity comes first because we are using the local ingredient for the local food. We have a unique food culture. This food we cannot find anywhere else”. The researcher could identify Sri Lankan people using local ingredients to prepare authentic local food which adds a unique taste, flavour, and aroma to food. They tend to use their local ingredients and that helped them to reflect their authenticity. Some of the respondents have clearly articulated that “local food is the food which is made with local ingredients. This food is special to the Sri Lankan culture. When we are talking about the local food in Sri Lanka it can be different from region to region and culture to culture, because Sri Lanka is a multicultural country. Ex: Lotus roots.”

5.2. Findings pertaining to benefits of local food

According to the findings, the researcher has identified that Sri Lankan local food is rich in health and has ayurvedic benefits. One of the chefs interviewed highlighted that “*local food is healthier than the other cuisines*”. Sri Lanka offers food according to the tri- dosha apparat in Ayurveda; because of that all Sri Lankan local food and ingredients have separate health benefits. The health values and benefits can be changed according to the use of the food and food preparations. The findings revealed that they are using different clay pots of different sizes and shapes to cook food. There are different cooking methods for local food, and while cooking in each method the uses of local spices and herbs changed. Another informant has informed that “*different tastes/aromas and health values can be added to local food by the way the food is used, cooking method, and cooking equipment*”. It can add a unique taste with different

benefits through the way we use food, cooking methods, and cooking equipment. Respondents mentioned that when local spices are mixed with ingredients it can add an attractive smell taste and aroma to food. All this increases the level of the health value of the dishes. The majority of chefs have said that *“every ingredient has unique health benefits. Also, we don’t add chemicals to the local cuisines and if we are adding any food with chemicals it also can be made better using the local ingredients (Karapincha).”*

There is another side to the benefits of local food: community well-being as well as the development of the country's economy. One chef has informed about the community development from the local food: *“another side that we can see from the local food is we can increase the domestic farming. Finally, it will help to increase the community wellbeing.”* Increasing the demand for local food will benefit the local community because the raw materials are taken from the local community, which will help to increase the local farming and the country's economy. Sri Lanka has many recourses to increase local food farming. Industry people can get the raw materials without any delays. These can be a good way to sustain the industry as well as the country's economy. Chefs' responses regarding sustainability were *“we can easily develop the nation's sustainability. We are having many resources therefore we don't need to wait for the supply of the ingredients and food”*.

5.3. Findings pertaining to demand for local food

The findings on the demand for local food have reflected that Sri Lankan local food has a demand but it is still developing. One interviewed chef highlighted that *“it is still a developing sector in tourism because we have not focused much on promoting local food”*. Local food is a trending concept in the tourism and hospitality sector. Tourists are trying to get unique and new experiences within their tours. The main reason for Sri Lankan local food demand is the variety of dishes because in Sri Lanka a variety of dishes is used for one meal. Sri Lankan cuisine is more colorful and it can be cooked in different styles. Some tourists are willing to experience the local culture along with the local cuisine. From that tourists can engage with local people and easily share their experiences. Some of the hotels do live cooking demonstrations with local people to increase the demand and awareness of local food in their hotels. Especially Asian travelers are trying all local food. Other tourists are not that attracted to the local food due to the spice level. Sri Lankan food is spicier than other food. Most of the tourists cannot have spicy food. Tourists are trying to have mildly spicy dishes. There is a high demand for rice and curry, kottu, paratha, samosa, jack fruit, fish ambulthiyal, etc. According to the local food demand responses *“tourists don't have much idea about the local food. We don't get much demand for the local food, because local food is spicy. International tourists don't like to have spicy food, only the Asian people are trying to get the experience of the local food.”* When compared to other sectors in tourism, local food is still a developing sector in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan government and regulatory bodies for the development of tourists still have not given much attention to developing local food tourism concepts. Tourists also do not have much idea about the local food. They try to get the experience once they see the local cooking demonstration or local food in the hotels or restaurants.

The second objective of this study is to discuss the key strategies which can be adapted to enhance the local food demand in 5-star and 4-star hotels in Sri Lanka. To obtain the data researcher used five open-ended questions. According to the research objectives and findings of the interview two themes were developed.

Table 2: Theme Summary

Objective	Themes
Examine the key strategies which can be adapted to enhance the local food demand in 5-star and 4-star hotels in Sri Lanka	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Promotion and attraction2. Local food and COVID 19

5.4. Findings pertaining to promotion and attraction of local food

According to the findings of the research objective, one reflected that the Sri Lankan local food sector is still under development. Local food tourism is a trending and profitable sector. One interviewed chef disclosed that *“we have attractive and colorful fruits and vegetables that are endemic to Sri Lanka.”* Publicity and promotion are the best ways to attract more and more tourists to local food. It is essential to start proper marketing campaigns to promote local food in the international market. When organizing the marketing of local food, the value of the food, food name, cooking styles and methods, food preparation equipment and the use of them, local culture, and folk stories related to local food must be shared. Chefs from the management level have informed that *“they like to experience Sri Lankan food preparations and we can use these ingredients in nice food presentations. Lotus levees/ coconut shelves/ Bamboo trees”*. Currently, social media marketing is a very efficient and effective way to promote any product. It is much better if we can social media marketing, YouTube, and blogs with the correct information about the local food and along with that we need to do live cooking demonstration videos with clear explanations. Another thing that we can do is arrange attractive dishes by using the local foods. Natural items can be used for adding color and garnishing the dish. It is better to add a local food buffet in the restaurant instead of an international buffet because the tourists have their food in their home country and they are trying to have a new experience on their tour. Responses were as follows about the demand for local food, *“most of the tourists are coming to Sri Lanka to have the local food. Kottu, paratha, and samosa are not the local food, but it is more famous food among international tourists. Also, they like Sri Lankan food culture. In their countries, they cannot get fresh food.”*

5.5. Findings pertaining of local food and COVID 19

Local food has become a strong influencer in the tourism industry with the invasion of the COVID 19 pandemic around the world. According to the health guidelines doctors have recommended that spicy food is better for COVID 19. Some of the chefs with an ayurvedic background have articulated that *“according to research doctors have suggested that spicy food is good for COVID. Also, we are having food with deferent health benefits and we are using local food as a medicine. With that recommendation, we can easily promote local food among international tourists”*.

Apart from that Sri Lankan local food has plenty of health benefits. Concepts like health and safety, sanitization, health values, local food, new taste and experiences, and spicy food have come into the industry with the pandemic. The hotel industry is highly dependent on health and safety practices after the COVID pandemic. Due to the COVID pandemic, most people are following healthy habits and are trying to have healthy meals instead of fast food. Therefore, we can get good demand for local food. Sri Lanka is a very famous destination for Ayurveda. The majority of the chefs have informed that *“as we all know Sri Lankan food and beverages are healthier. Due to covid, most of them tend to have healthy food. We can easily*

promote our local cuisine by explaining the values of the food and beverages for them. Our food fulfills these requirements.”

6. Results and discussion

The researcher has used well-experienced and qualified chefs who specialize in local food to gather the information for this study. According to their perception, Sri Lankan food has good demand in the tourism and hospitality industry. There should be a proper promotion of the local food in the international market. Responses have given a clear idea of the local food. According to their perceptions, local food should be a unique food that is specialized for a particular culture, region, or country. Local food reflects the authenticity of the country. With the local food, the local cultural experiences can be shared with the consumers. Sri Lankan people are using the local food not only for consumption but also for spiritual activities and worshipping the gods. There is plenty of local food we can have in Sri Lanka and also the food taste and the way they are cooked is different from region to region. Based on their environment food culture is different but they all keep the health value of the food. Sri Lankan food culture is a very attractive sector. We are using clay pots of different shapes and sizes for cooking. Based on the size and the shape the use of the equipment for food is different. Some of the pots are specially designed for a specific food. It also adds taste, aroma, and health value to the dishes. Lamp rice and spinach rice are the best examples of healthy and tasty food. In these dishes, people can eat the food cover after having the meal. Every tourist coming to Sri Lanka has a satisfactory and positive image of local food. They like to have a variety of dishes, vegetables, fruits, and juices in Sri Lanka. Most of them like to have rice and curry, seafood, ambulthiyal, dhal curry, chicken curry, mild rice, string hoppers, prawns, mango, pineapple, jackfruit, etc. According to the chefs, Sri Lankan food is spicy and tasty; and also, it has very healthy, authentic food with different nutritional values. The majority of the tourists like to have Sri Lankan spices but they do not like to have too spicy food. They are requesting mildly spicy local food and food fused with western food culture.

According to the perception of demand for Sri Lankan local food in the international market, the demand for local food is still under development in Sri Lanka. Tourism annual reports and tourism promotion bodies need to focus attention on the development of the local food industry in Sri Lanka. It will be better. Finally, most of the chefs suggested different strategies to promote local food among tourists, such as developing websites, Instagram, Facebook social media promotions, local food documentaries, YouTube channels, displaying pictures and videos on international airports, and organizing local food exhibitions/ food festivals at local and international levels. The majority of the tourists are willing to have local food during their journey but they do not know about the places where they can find the local food. Also, guests are not aware of the health benefits of the local food. Finally, it can be concluded that Sri Lanka has more potential to promote local food among tourists.

7. Conclusion

As per the findings, it was concluded that local food tourism must be developed in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is having more potential for gastronomy tourism concept along with the local food, because Sri Lankan food is different from other food and also Sri Lanka is having varieties of food such as regional food, different cultural food, ayurvedic food, etc. Yet, Sri Lankan government bodies do not follow proper mechanisms to promote local food among tourists. Therefore, government and tourism development bodies should be involved in the collaboration of local food suppliers to promote local food among tourists. They can do the following to promote local food. As Sri Lankans, we should think of local food as an art. When

we are going to explain the local food for the international market it is essential to explain the history. Then only people can get a good image of the local food. Need to do teaching sessions and awareness sessions in the hotels about the local food, especially for international tourists. Some of the hotels do live cookery demonstrations with the villagers. We need to train villagers well about the proper way to explain the food, and they must explain each ingredient with their use and benefits. It can help to give the correct idea to the participants. Most hotels have an international buffet in their restaurant. Based on the research outcomes, it is suggested that it is better to include local food in the main buffet as an alternative dish. Apart from that, the industry needs trained chefs who specialize in local food. Unfortunately, Sri Lanka does not have good demand for chefs who specialize in local food. Therefore, we need to have a proper standard and recognition for Sri Lankan chefs. It is a must to use organic local ingredients to maintain the quality of the food. When we are promoting the local food in the hotels it will be better to get the contribution from the ayurvedic doctors. Sri Lanka has a high-quality Ayurveda concept.

It is much better to focus on social media marketing by posting videos about the local dishes with English translations or subtitles and need to post the videos on international news channels and magazines.

Another important thing that can be suggested is that it will be more effective to organize a local food festival with the collaboration of international organizations to create more awareness about Sri Lankan food.

8. Direction for future research

This study attempted to investigate the demand for local food in five- and four-star hotels in Sri Lanka from the perception of Sri Lankan chefs. With the limitations of the time and COVID 19 pandemic, the research has interviewed only ten chefs as the sample. Further research in this area could use a larger sample size or multiple countries to compare the similarities and differences. It can be used to measure the tourists' and chefs' perceptions of the ayurvedic food in Sri Lanka, and parallel to this further research can be done to compare and contrast the local ayurvedic food tourism concepts with the other countries.

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