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# Gastronomical Practices and Sustainable Ecotourism Development: Insights from Two Eco-Destinations in Southwest Nigeria

\*Ndasule, A. N.<sup>1</sup>, \*Oyeleke, O. O.<sup>2</sup> and \*Oladeji S. O.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Hospitality Management, Federal Polytechnic, Ede, Osun State, NIGERIA

<sup>2</sup>Department of Ecotourism and Wildlife Management, The Federal University of Technology, Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria

<sup>3</sup>Department of Ecotourism and Wildlife Management, The Federal University of Technology, Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria

**Correspondence:** ndasule.nora@federalpolyede.edu.ng; oyelekeoo@futa.edu.ng; oladejiso@futa.edu.ng

### ABSTRACT

Gastronomy plays a significant role in the overall tourism experience, particularly in ecotourism destinations where visitors seek authentic and unique culinary experiences that are often linked to the local culture and environment. This study was carried out to find out the obtainable gastronomical practices and management style in selected ecotourism destinations in Lagos and Oyo State Nigeria using 167 copies of well-structured questionnaire. Data obtained revealed that, 18.0% of the ecotourism destinations practiced community-based dining and 18.0% of the ecotourism destinations practiced incorporation of native ingredients. The study also showed that there is a moderate level of knowledge and perception of employees concerning gastronomical practices at the destinations. The study concludes that the moderate level of knowledge and perception among employees regarding gastronomical practices suggests that while there is a foundational understanding, there is significant room for improvement. The study therefore recommends that the ministry of tourism should develop and promote a standardized framework for gastronomical practices that can be adopted by all ecotourism destinations.

**Keywords:** Gastronomy Practices, Ecotourism Destinations

### Introduction

Gastronomy plays a significant role in the overall tourism experience, particularly in ecotourism destinations where visitors seek authentic and unique culinary experiences that are often linked to the local culture and environment (Baysal and Bilici, 2024). Lagos and Oyo states in Nigeria are known for their diverse ecotourism offerings, including natural attractions such as beaches, forests, and wildlife sanctuaries. As such, understanding the gastronomical management practices in these destinations is crucial for enhancing the overall

visitor experience and promoting sustainable tourism development. According to research by Alamu, *et al.* (2019), gastronomy is an integral part of the tourism experience, as it reflects the cultural identity of a destination and offers visitors a unique insight into the local way of life. In the context of ecotourism destinations, culinary offerings are often sourced from sustainable and locally produced ingredients, contributing to the conservation of the natural environment and supporting local communities (Hall & Sharples, 2020).

The fields of gastronomic, culinary, or food tourism have received increased interest among scholars,

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resulting in ‘a specialized branch of tourism studies’ (Putra, 2021). Indeed, in the last decade, a number of developments have encouraged a renewed interest in food and tourism.

Despite the potential benefits of integrating gastronomy into ecotourism management practices, there is a dearth of studies focusing on this aspect in the Nigerian context. There is a need for research that explores the gastronomical management practices in ecotourism destinations in Nigeria to better understand how food experiences can contribute to the overall sustainability of these destinations. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining the gastronomical management practices in the selected ecotourism destinations. By conducting interviews with key stakeholders such as local chefs, restaurant owners, and tour operators, the study seeks to identify the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating gastronomy into ecotourism management practices in these destinations.

The objective of this research therefore is to find out the obtainable gastronomical practices in selected ecotourism destinations in Lagos and Oyo State Nigeria.

## Materials And Methods

### Study Area

The study was carried out in two locations in Nigeria which consists of Lagos and Oyo states.

Lagos State, located in the southwestern part of Nigeria (Figure 1), is a significant region in terms of land mass, population, and economic value. Lagos State has a total land area of approximately 3,577 square kilometers, making it one of the smallest states in Nigeria in terms of land size. Despite its relatively small land mass, Lagos State is densely populated and highly urbanized, with a rapidly growing population and bustling economic activities concentrated in its urban centers.

As of the latest available data, the population of Lagos State is estimated to be over 21 million people, making it one of the most populous states in Nigeria and Africa. The state’s population is diverse, with people

from various ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds residing in urban areas such as Lagos Island, Ikeja, and Lekki.



Figure 1: Lagos State Map

Source: Lawson *et al.*, 2010

Oyo State (Figure 2), located in the southwestern part of Nigeria, is a state with significant land mass, population, and economic value. Oyo State has a total land area of approximately 28,454 square kilometers, making it one of the largest states in Nigeria in terms of land size. The state is characterized by a diverse geography, including plains, hills, and forests. Oyo

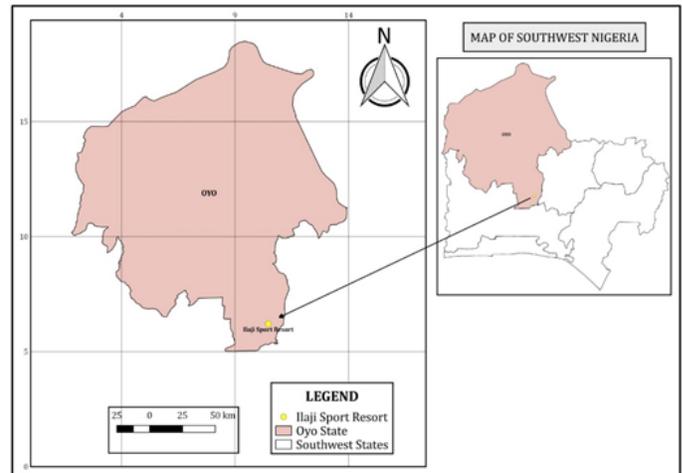


Figure 2: Oyo State Map

Source: Olajide *et al.*, 2010

State is strategically located, sharing borders with states such as Ogun, Osun, Kwara, and Lagos. As of the latest available data, the population of Oyo State is estimated to be over 8 million people, making it one of the most populous states in Nigeria.

The study was streamlined to Whispering Palms in Lagos State (Figure 3) and Ilaji resort sport resort, Oyo state (Figure 4). The two resorts were selected chosen based on a fundamental characteristic intrinsic to the concept of a resort: their proximity to either natural or man-made features. This approach aligns with the definition of resorts as establishments that provide recreational and leisure activities often set in picturesque or strategically advantageous locations (Smith, 2010; Swarbrooke, 1999; Agarwal, 2002).



**Figure 4:** Ilaji resort Sport Resort, Ilaji resort Oyo State

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Low (1) which was used to measure knowledge and perception of employees of the selected ecotourism destinations on gastronomical practices.

**Sample Size**

The study employed the use of krejcie and Morgan method to determine the number of staff for the Research Population, i.e.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)} \tag{1}$$

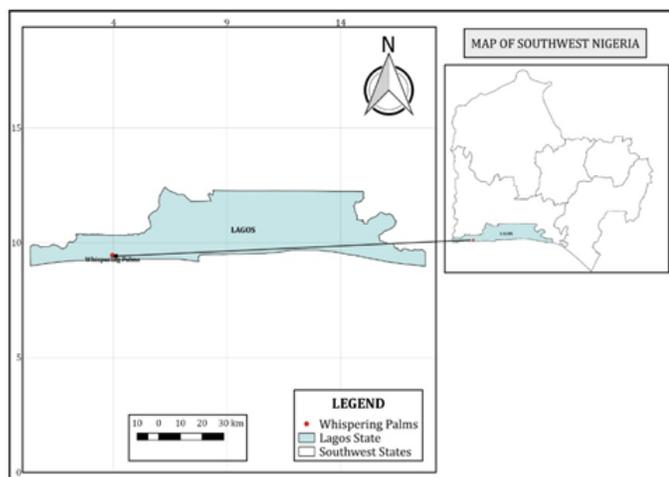
Where: n = Sample size, N = Total population size, e = Margin of error (0.05)

For Badagry: (N = 98) staff, For Ilaji: (N = 110) staff, a margin of error (e) = 0.05 (5%).

For Badagry: n = 79

For Ilaji: n = 88

Based on the above: Staff: Badagry-79, Ilaji-88.



**Figure 3:** Whispering Palm Resort, Whispering Palm Resort, Badagry Lagos State.

Source: Field Survey, 2023

**Method of Data Collection**

The study made use of quantitative method for data collection and consists of harmonized questions that specify exact terms for collecting information from respondents which was administered in person. The questionnaires were self-constructed based on the variables under study and the literature review. Section A focused on various obtainable gastronomical practices at the destinations and section B contained 10 items on 5 likert scale of VH: Very High (5), H: High (4), M: Moderate (3), L: Low (2), VL: Very

**Method of Data Analysis**

The data obtained was analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Descriptive Statistics such as chart, tables (frequencies and percentages), means and standard deviation was used to answer the results.

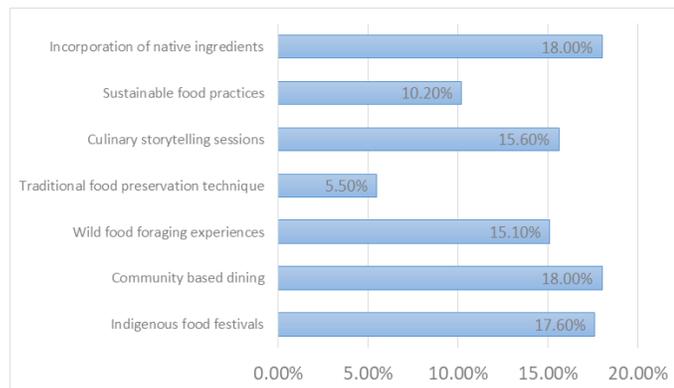
## Results and Discussion

### Obtainable Gastronomical Practices in the Ecotourism Destination

Figure 5 present the obtainable gastronomical practices in the selected ecotourism destination, whispering Palm Resort, Badagry and Ilaji Resort. The findings of the study reveals a rich tapestry of culinary traditions and innovative food-related activities that enhance the ecotourism experience. The findings indicate that Indigenous cuisine festivals constitute 17.6%, underscoring the significance of cultural heritage in the attraction of tourists.. Indigenous food festivals serve as a platform to celebrate and preserve local culinary traditions, offering tourists an authentic taste of the region's culture. According to Sidali *et al.* (2013), food festivals can significantly boost local tourism by showcasing regional specialties and fostering a sense of community pride. These festivals not only provide a unique attraction but also contribute to the local economy by promoting local food producers and artisans. Community-based dining, which comprises 18.0%, underscores the communal dimensions of food consumption and dining experiences.. This practice involves tourists dining with local families or in communal settings, offering a more intimate and culturally immersive experience. Research by Sims (2009) suggests that such dining experiences can deepen tourists' understanding of local cultures and enhance their overall satisfaction. Community-based dining fosters social interaction between tourists and locals, creating memorable experiences that are likely to encourage repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth promotion. The practice of wild food foraging was identified as being engaged in by 15.1% of participants in the selected destinations, reflecting the increasing interest in sustainable and experiential tourism. Foraging tours offer tourists the opportunity to learn about and gather edible wild plants, mushrooms, and other natural foods. This practice aligns with the principles of ecotourism by promoting sustainability and environmental awareness. According to McLain *et al.* (2014), foraging experiences can enrich the tourist experience

by connecting them to the natural environment and traditional knowledge systems. Such activities also emphasize the importance of biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources. The application of traditional food preservation techniques within the selected destinations accounts for 5.5% and signifies a commitment to safeguarding culinary heritage while promoting sustainability. Traditional methods such as smoking, drying, and fermenting foods not only reduce food waste but also offer tourists a unique insight into local food cultures. This notion is corroborated by Kato (2020), who emphasized that the preservation of traditional food techniques is essential for maintaining cultural identity and offering sustainable food alternatives within the tourism sector. These practices also educate tourists about the historical and cultural significance of local foods. The participants in the selected destinations reported 15.6% of culinary storytelling sessions, which enhance the gastronomic experience by intertwining food with narrative elements. These sessions involve chefs or local storytellers sharing the history, cultural significance, and personal stories behind traditional dishes. According to Ottenbacher & Harrington (2013), storytelling can significantly enhance the culinary experience by creating emotional connections and enriching the cultural context of the food. Culinary storytelling not only entertains but also educates tourists, making the dining experience more engaging and meaningful. Sustainable food practices accounted for 10.2% at the selected destinations, and are increasingly important in the context of global environmental challenges. These practices include sourcing local and organic ingredients, minimizing food waste, and promoting plant-based diets. As noted by Hall and Gössling (2016), sustainable food practices in tourism are essential for reducing the environmental impact of food production and consumption. By adopting sustainable practices, ecotourism destinations can appeal to environmentally conscious tourists and contribute to the broader goals of sustainability. The incorporation of native ingredients, practiced by 18.0% at the selected destinations, underscores the importance of using locally sourced and traditional

foods in creating authentic culinary experiences. Utilizing native ingredients not only supports local agriculture but also preserves the culinary heritage of the region. According to Froehlich *et al.* (2020), the use of indigenous ingredients in tourism can enhance the authenticity and appeal of the gastronomical offerings, providing tourists with a unique taste of the local culture. This practice also promotes biodiversity and supports local farmers and producers.



**Figure 5:** Obtainable Gastronomical Practices in the Ecotourism Destinations

**Level of knowledge and perception of employees of the selected ecotourism destinations on gastronomical practices**

***Employees’ Knowledge of Gastronomical Practices***

The findings presented in Table 1 shows Employees’ Knowledge of Gastronomical Practices. The elevated knowledge scores pertaining to traditional dishes, flavors, and cultural narratives (evidenced by a high mean score of 3.53) substantiate the assertion that local communities serve as pivotal stewards of intangible culinary heritage. Research conducted by Sims (2009) and Everett & Aitchison (2008) has similarly documented that indigenous knowledge of food traditions is predominantly robust among individuals employed in tourism sectors. This heightened cultural cognizance is of paramount importance, as gastronomy is increasingly acknowledged as a manifestation of place identity and heritage interpretation within tourism frameworks (Bessière, 2013).

In contrast, the moderate evaluations in practical culinary techniques, utilization of traditional ingredients (moderately rated at 3.14), and culinary training elucidate existing skill deficiencies (rated moderately at 3.41). Investigations within the realm of culinary tourism frequently underscore such inconsistencies: personnel may possess an understanding of local food culture yet lack the technical proficiency required to translate this knowledge into immersive gastronomic experiences (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Okumus (2020) underscores that in the absence of structured culinary training, destinations encounter difficulties in transforming cultural food heritage into high-caliber gastronomic experiences. Analogous studies conducted in African and Asian contexts similarly highlight inadequate professional development in local cuisine preparation among tourism personnel (Teng & Chang, 2013).

***Employees’ Perceptions of Gastronomical Practices***

Table 2 present the employee perceptions on gastronomical practices. Moderate perceptions regarding the significance of local cuisine in augmenting the tourist experience (documented with a moderate score of 3.30) align with findings by Stone, Soulard, Migacz & Wolf (2018), who indicate that numerous tourism employees regard food as vital to visitor satisfaction, albeit they may not fully comprehend its strategic significance in destination competitiveness. The employees’ moderate motivation to advocate for traditional dishes (3.44) likewise mirrors trends observed in the literature: staff often endorse local gastronomy but necessitate managerial support, incentives, and confidence-building to actively champion it (Hjalager & Richards, 2002).

The moderate confidence in recommending local dishes to tourists (notably higher moderate score of 3.41) implies a partial congruence with prior research suggesting that frontline workers frequently lack the communicative competencies required to articulate gastronomic narratives (Lin, Pearson & Cai, 2011). This shortcoming undermines the capacity of

**Table 1:** Employees’ Knowledge of Gastronomical Practices

S/N	Questionnaire Items	VH	H	M	L	VL	Mean	Decision
1	How well do you know and understand the traditional dishes and flavors	54	33	39	17	19	<b>3.53</b>	High
2	How confident are you in using the specific cooking methods unique to the local dishes?	32	34	33	36	27	<b>3.04</b>	Moderate
3	How acquainted are you with the unique and traditional ingredients that define the local gastronomy?	34	33	37	39	19	<b>3.14</b>	Moderate
4	How well do you understand the cultural stories and significance behind our traditional dishes?	55	34	33	23	17	<b>3.53</b>	High
5	What kind of training or education have you received regarding culinary heritage?	55	20	37	36	14	<b>3.41</b>	Moderate

employees to function as cultural interpreters an integral element of gastronomic tourism, where narrative and food authenticity markedly affect visitor experiences (Ellis, Park, Kim & Yeoman, 2018).

Moreover, employees’ moderate inclination towards additional training programs (moderate score of

3.06) corroborates the literature advocating for capacity-building initiatives as vital for enhancing both knowledge and perception of gastronomic value (UNWTO, 2019). In the absence of ongoing professional development, the ability of workers to deliver authentic and engaging gastronomic experiences remains severely limited.

**Table 2:** Employees’ Perception of Gastronomical Practices

S/N	Questionnaire Items	VH	H	M	L	VL	Mean	Decision
6	How comfortable are you in explaining our menu items to guests, emphasizing their local significance?	43	31	39	29	20	<b>3.29</b>	Moderate
7	How important do you think our local cuisine is in enhancing the overall tourist experience?	34	52	28	25	23	<b>3.30</b>	Moderate
8	How motivated are you to promote the traditional dishes to visitors?	58	29	20	37	18	<b>3.44</b>	Moderate
9	How confident do you feel in recommending traditional dishes to tourists?	50	30	34	33	15	<b>3.41</b>	Moderate
10	How interested are you in participating in additional training or educational programs focusing on the local gastronomy?	34	31	34	37	26	<b>3.06</b>	Moderate

## Conclusion

The study concludes that the moderate level of knowledge and perception among employees regarding gastronomical practices suggests that while there is a foundational understanding, there is significant room for improvement. Enhancing employee training and engagement in gastronomical practices can lead to more effective implementation and a more enriching experience for tourists. It is therefore recommended that the ministry of tourism should develop and promote a standardized framework for gastronomical practices that can be adopted by all ecotourism destinations. This framework should highlight the benefits of each practice, provide guidelines for implementation, and offer resources for training staff.

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