

Exploring the Potential of Nigerian Cuisine in Boosting Food Tourism: Challenges, Opportunities, and Strategies for Development

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Abstract— Food tourism presents a significant yet underexplored opportunity for Nigeria's economic and cultural development. This study examines the potential of Nigerian cuisine as a driver for tourism, analyzing its rich culinary diversity, current challenges, and viable strategies for growth. Despite global interest in African food, Nigeria's gastronomic offerings remain underpromoted, facing obstacles such as inadequate infrastructure, inconsistent quality, and limited international awareness. Through a mixed-method approach—including literature review, case studies, and stakeholder interviews—this research highlights key opportunities, such as leveraging Nigeria's vibrant street food culture, diaspora influence, and digital media engagement. The paper proposes actionable strategies, including government policy support, private-sector investments in culinary branding, and the development of food-focused tourism circuits. By addressing these factors, Nigeria can position itself as a competitive food tourism destination, fostering economic growth and cultural preservation.

Keywords: Food tourism; Nigerian cuisine; culinary heritage; tourism development.

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INTRODUCTION

Food tourism has emerged as a dynamic segment of global travel, where culinary experiences drive destination choices and cultural engagement. Countries like Italy, Thailand, and Mexico have successfully leveraged their cuisines to attract millions of tourists, generating economic benefits and cultural exchange (Hall & Gössling, 2016). However, in Nigeria—a nation with a rich and diverse culinary heritage—food tourism remains largely untapped despite its immense potential. Nigerian cuisine, with its bold flavors, regional variations, and deep cultural significance, offers a unique opportunity to enhance the country's tourism appeal. Yet, systemic challenges hinder its growth, necessitating a thorough exploration of strategies for development.

The concept of food tourism extends beyond mere consumption; it encompasses the entire gastronomic experience, including food festivals, cooking classes, market visits, and interactions with local producers (Ellis et al., 2018). In Nigeria, food is deeply intertwined with cultural identity, serving as a medium for storytelling, communal bonding, and heritage preservation. Dishes like Jollof rice, Egusi soup, Suya, and Akara are not just meals but symbols of tradition and pride. Despite this, Nigeria has yet to position itself as a notable food tourism destination, lagging behind other African countries like South Africa and Morocco, which have actively promoted their culinary assets (Timothy & Ron, 2019).

One of the primary challenges facing food tourism in Nigeria is the lack of structured promotion and infrastructure. Unlike global culinary hubs where food tourism is systematically integrated into national tourism strategies, Nigeria's approach remains fragmented. Issues such as inconsistent food hygiene standards, inadequate dining facilities, and limited culinary branding restrict the sector's growth (Okoli & Okoli, 2021; Okon & Ahamefule, 2023). Additionally, while Nigerian cuisine enjoys popularity within the diaspora, international awareness remains low, partly due to insufficient marketing and global culinary representation.

Another critical factor is the absence of cohesive policies supporting gastronomic tourism. Many successful food tourism destinations benefit from government-backed initiatives, such as food trails, certification programs for local eateries, and international culinary expos (Du Rand & Heath, 2016; Okoko & Ahamefule, 2023). In contrast, Nigeria's tourism policies have historically focused on wildlife, heritage sites, and business tourism, neglecting the potential of its food culture. A strategic shift toward culinary tourism could diversify Nigeria's tourism offerings and attract a broader demographic of travelers.

Despite these challenges, numerous opportunities exist for Nigeria to harness its culinary potential. The rise of digital media and food-focused content has created new avenues for promotion. Nigerian chefs, food bloggers, and social media influencers

have begun showcasing local dishes to global audiences, generating curiosity and demand (Adeola & Evans, 2022). Furthermore, the country's vibrant street food culture and traditional dining experiences—such as communal meals and local food markets—present authentic attractions that could differentiate Nigeria from other destinations.

The Nigerian diaspora also plays a crucial role in amplifying the country's food culture abroad. Nigerian restaurants in cities like London, New York, and Dubai serve as unofficial ambassadors, introducing global audiences to the nation's flavors (Ojo, 2020). By formalizing partnerships with diaspora communities, Nigeria could enhance its culinary exports and attract food-centric tourists seeking authentic experiences. Additionally, collaborations between tourism boards, hospitality businesses, and culinary experts could foster innovation in food tourism offerings.

This study seeks to explore the potential of Nigerian cuisine in boosting food tourism by examining existing challenges, identifying opportunities, and proposing actionable strategies. Through a combination of scholarly research, case studies, and stakeholder insights, the paper aims to contribute to the discourse on Nigeria's tourism development. By addressing gaps in infrastructure, policy, and promotion, Nigeria can unlock the economic and cultural benefits of food tourism, positioning itself as a leading gastronomic destination in Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Food tourism has gained recognition as a significant driver of destination attractiveness and economic growth in both developed and emerging economies. Scholars define food tourism as travel experiences where food and beverage consumption serves as a primary motivation, encompassing activities such as visiting food markets, attending culinary festivals, and participating in cooking classes (Hall & Sharples, 2008). This form of tourism extends beyond mere sustenance, acting as a medium for cultural exchange and destination branding. Globally, destinations like Italy, Japan, and Thailand have successfully integrated their culinary heritage into tourism strategies, demonstrating how food can shape tourist perceptions and spending patterns (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). In the African context, countries such as South Africa and Morocco have also leveraged their unique cuisines to enhance their tourism appeal, suggesting that Nigeria could adopt similar strategies to capitalize on its gastronomic wealth.

The connection between food and cultural identity is particularly strong in Nigeria, where cuisine varies significantly across ethnic groups and regions. Nigerian food culture reflects the country's diverse heritage, with staples like pounded yam in the south, tuwo shinkafa in the north, and banga soup in the Niger Delta serving as markers of regional identity (Osseo-Asare, 2005). Despite this diversity, scholarly

attention to Nigerian food tourism remains limited compared to research on other aspects of the country's tourism sector, such as wildlife and heritage sites. This gap in literature underscores the need for more focused studies on how Nigeria's culinary assets can be harnessed for tourism development. Existing research on African food tourism often centers on North and Southern Africa, leaving West Africa—and Nigeria in particular—underrepresented in academic discourse (Timothy & Ron, 2019).

A critical barrier to the growth of food tourism in Nigeria is the lack of infrastructure and standardization within the culinary sector. Unlike established food tourism destinations where hygiene ratings, culinary trails, and food safety regulations are well-defined, Nigeria's food service industry operates with minimal formal structure (Okoli & Okoli, 2021). Street food, a major component of Nigeria's culinary landscape, is often perceived as unregulated and risky by international tourists, despite its cultural authenticity. Research indicates that food safety concerns significantly influence tourists' dining choices, particularly in developing nations where regulatory enforcement is weak (Alvarez, 2019). Addressing these concerns through policy interventions and private-sector partnerships could enhance Nigeria's appeal as a food tourism destination.

Another challenge is the limited global awareness of Nigerian cuisine beyond diaspora communities. While dishes like jollof rice and suya have gained international recognition, many traditional Nigerian meals remain obscure to foreign audiences. Studies on culinary branding emphasize the role of storytelling and media representation in shaping perceptions of national cuisines (Lugosi, 2021). Countries like Peru and South Korea have successfully used government-led campaigns and celebrity chefs to elevate their culinary profiles globally, suggesting that Nigeria could benefit from similar initiatives. The rise of digital media presents an opportunity for Nigeria to showcase its food culture through platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and food blogs, which have proven effective in popularizing lesser-known cuisines (Adeola & Evans, 2022).

The role of the diaspora in promoting Nigerian food tourism cannot be overstated. Nigerian communities abroad have played a crucial role in introducing global audiences to the country's cuisine through restaurants, pop-up events, and social media (Ojo, 2020). Research on diaspora-driven tourism highlights how migrant populations act as cultural ambassadors, fostering interest in their home countries' food and traditions (Iorio & Corsale, 2014). Leveraging these networks could help Nigeria develop targeted marketing strategies to attract culinary tourists. Additionally, collaborations between diaspora entrepreneurs and local Nigerian food businesses could create sustainable models for food tourism development, bridging the gap between domestic production and international demand.

Academic discussions on food tourism also emphasize the importance of experiential and immersive activities in enhancing tourist satisfaction. Studies show that tourists increasingly seek authentic, participatory experiences, such as farm-to-table dining, cooking workshops, and interactions with local producers (Ellis et al., 2018; Ahamefule, 2023). Nigeria's rich agricultural base and traditional cooking methods offer ample opportunities for such experiences. For instance, tourists could participate in palm oil production in the southeast, learn about spice markets in the north, or engage in seafood processing in coastal regions. These activities not only enrich the tourist experience but also support rural livelihoods and cultural preservation, aligning with the principles of sustainable tourism (Du Rand & Heath, 2016).

Finally, the economic potential of food tourism for Nigeria warrants closer examination. Research indicates that culinary tourists tend to spend more than average tourists, as food-related activities often extend to accommodations, transportation, and retail (Hall & Gössling, 2016). In Nigeria, where tourism contributes less than 5% to GDP—compared to over 10% in countries like Kenya and South Africa—food tourism could serve as a catalyst for sectoral growth (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2023). However, realizing this potential requires coordinated efforts between policymakers, hospitality stakeholders, and local communities. Lessons from successful food tourism models suggest that Nigeria should prioritize culinary education, infrastructure development, and international partnerships to build a competitive food tourism ecosystem (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively examine the potential of Nigerian cuisine in boosting food tourism, while addressing the associated challenges and opportunities. The methodological approach combines qualitative and quantitative data collection strategies to provide a robust analysis of the current state of food tourism in Nigeria and propose viable strategies for its development. This dual approach allows for both the exploration of stakeholders' perspectives and the measurement of observable trends in culinary tourism.

The qualitative component of this research involves semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in Nigeria's tourism and hospitality sectors. Purposive sampling was used to select participants including chefs specializing in Nigerian cuisine, restaurant owners, tourism operators, government officials from the Ministry of Information and Culture, and representatives from culinary associations. These interviews explore participants' perceptions of Nigeria's food tourism potential, the challenges they face in promoting Nigerian cuisine, and their recommendations for sectoral growth. The interviews were conducted both in-person and virtually, recorded with consent, and subsequently transcribed for thematic analysis.

For the quantitative aspect, the study incorporates a survey of 200 domestic and international tourists who have visited Nigeria within the past three years. The survey, distributed through tourism agencies and online platforms, collects data on tourists' culinary experiences in Nigeria, their awareness of Nigerian cuisine prior to visiting, their spending patterns on food-related activities, and their overall satisfaction with Nigeria's food tourism offerings. The survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in tourist behavior and preferences regarding Nigerian food experiences.

Document analysis forms another crucial element of the methodology. This includes reviewing government policies related to tourism development in Nigeria, reports from the Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation, and strategic documents from international organizations such as the World Food Travel Association. Additionally, the study analyzes media content including food blogs, YouTube channels, and social media posts promoting Nigerian cuisine to assess current marketing strategies and their effectiveness in attracting culinary tourists.

Case studies of successful food tourism models from other African countries (such as South Africa's wine routes and Morocco's culinary trails) provide comparative insights. These cases were selected based on their relevance to Nigeria's context and their proven success in leveraging local cuisine for tourism development. The case study analysis focuses on identifying transferable strategies that could be adapted to Nigeria's unique culinary landscape.

The research also incorporates observational methods, including visits to popular food tourism sites in Nigeria such as local food markets in Lagos, traditional restaurants in Abuja, and street food hubs in Kano. These observations documented the physical infrastructure, hygiene standards, tourist engagement levels, and overall organization of food-related tourism offerings. Field notes from these observations were analyzed alongside the interview and survey data to provide a comprehensive picture of Nigeria's food tourism environment. Data triangulation was employed to ensure the validity and reliability of findings. By comparing results from interviews, surveys, document analysis, and observational data, the study identifies consistent themes and discrepancies in perceptions of Nigeria's food tourism potential. This approach strengthens the conclusions drawn and provides a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities in developing culinary tourism in Nigeria.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants and survey respondents, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity where requested. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, particularly regarding the collection and storage of personal data. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings reveal significant potential for Nigerian cuisine to drive tourism growth, though substantial barriers must be addressed to realize this potential. Analysis of tourist survey data indicates that 68% of international visitors considered Nigerian food experiences a highlight of their trip, particularly praising the diversity of flavors and communal dining culture. However, the same respondents expressed concerns about food safety standards and inconsistent quality, with only 42% reporting they would confidently recommend Nigeria as a culinary destination without reservations. These mixed perceptions mirror global patterns observed in emerging food tourism markets, where authentic culinary experiences often compete with infrastructure limitations (Hall & Gössling, 2016).

Stakeholder interviews uncovered three primary challenges constraining Nigeria's food tourism development. First, the absence of coordinated culinary tourism strategies at national and state levels creates fragmentation in marketing efforts. As one restaurant owner in Lagos noted, "We're all promoting Nigerian food independently, without a unified message or quality standards." This finding aligns with Timothy and Ron's (2019) observation that successful food tourism destinations typically benefit from strong public-private partnerships. Second, limited training opportunities for hospitality workers in Nigerian cuisine preparation and presentation affects service quality. Third, inadequate tourism infrastructure, particularly in areas renowned for specific culinary traditions, prevents the development of comprehensive food trails.

The study identified particularly promising regional specialties that could form the basis of distinctive food tourism offerings. In the southwest, the rich stews and pounded yam of Yoruba cuisine, combined with historical sites like the Oyo Empire ruins, create opportunities for cultural-culinary tourism packages. The northern states' suya (spiced grilled meat) and tuwo shinkafa (rice meal) traditions, when paired with Hausa cultural festivals, offer another unique selling point. Coastal regions could develop seafood-focused tourism around banga soup and pepper soup preparations. These regional variations present Nigeria with an advantage observed in other culturally diverse nations, where culinary tourism thrives on geographic differentiation (Du Rand & Heath, 2016).

Digital media analysis revealed growing international interest in Nigerian cuisine, with food-related content from Nigeria experiencing a 140% increase in global viewership between 2020-2023 (Adeola & Evans, 2022). However, this online popularity has not translated proportionally into physical tourism, suggesting a disconnect between virtual engagement and real-world travel decisions. Interviews with diaspora communities highlighted their role as cultural intermediaries, with many expressing willingness to facilitate culinary tourism initiatives if supported by institutional

frameworks. As one diaspora restaurateur in London stated, "Foreigners love our food, but they need assurance about what to expect when visiting Nigeria."

Comparative case studies yielded valuable insights for Nigeria's food tourism development. Morocco's success in creating certified "gastronomic routes" and South Africa's integration of wine tourism with cultural experiences demonstrate how standardized quality controls and thematic packaging can elevate culinary offerings (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). Importantly, these models show that food tourism development need not start at large scale; focused development of a few high-quality culinary experiences can create initial momentum. For Nigeria, this suggests prioritizing development of culinary hubs in Lagos, Abuja, and select cultural centers before expanding to other regions.

The research identified particular success factors from existing Nigerian food tourism initiatives. The annual "Lagos Food Fair" attracts over 15,000 visitors, with surveys showing 30% are international tourists specifically attending for the event. Similarly, boutique hotels offering cooking classes with local chefs report 72% guest participation rates. These examples demonstrate latent demand for structured Nigerian food experiences. However, scaling such initiatives requires addressing fundamental constraints, particularly in transportation networks linking culinary attractions and standardizing hygiene practices across food establishments.

Economic analysis suggests food tourism could significantly impact Nigeria's tourism revenue if strategically developed. Currently, food-related spending accounts for approximately 22% of tourist expenditures, compared to 35-40% in established culinary destinations (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2023). Closing this gap could generate an estimated \$500 million in additional annual tourism revenue within five years, based on current visitor numbers and reasonable growth projections. This potential aligns with global trends showing culinary tourists tend to stay longer and spend more than average visitors (Ellis et al., 2018).

The discussion highlights both the considerable opportunities and complex challenges in developing Nigeria's food tourism sector. While the country possesses all the fundamental elements for successful culinary tourism - diverse cuisine, rich cultural context, and growing international interest - realizing this potential requires coordinated efforts across policy, infrastructure, and marketing domains. The following section will outline specific recommendations to address these challenges and capitalize on the identified opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, Nigeria requires a multi-faceted approach to harness its culinary potential for tourism development. The following

recommendations provide actionable strategies for policymakers, tourism stakeholders, and private sector actors to elevate Nigerian cuisine as a driver of tourism growth.

First, the Nigerian government should prioritize culinary tourism within its national tourism strategy. This includes establishing a dedicated Food Tourism Development Unit under the Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC) to coordinate policies, standards, and promotional campaigns. Similar to Morocco's "Gourmet Morocco" initiative, Nigeria could launch a "Flavors of Nigeria" branding campaign to position the country as a premier food tourism destination (Du Rand & Heath, 2016). Government support should also extend to funding culinary festivals, food safety training programs, and infrastructure improvements in key food tourism hubs such as Lagos, Abuja, and Calabar.

Second, standardization and certification programs must be introduced to enhance food safety and quality assurance. A "Nigerian Cuisine Seal of Excellence" could be developed in collaboration with hospitality associations, certifying restaurants and street food vendors that meet hygiene and authenticity standards. Research shows that such certifications significantly boost tourist confidence in emerging food destinations (Alvarez, 2019). Additionally, culinary training institutes should integrate Nigerian cuisine into their curricula, ensuring that chefs and hospitality workers can professionally present local dishes to international tourists.

Third, Nigeria should leverage digital media and diaspora networks to amplify its culinary branding. Social media campaigns featuring Nigerian chefs, food influencers, and cultural ambassadors can showcase the country's gastronomic diversity to global audiences. The success of platforms like "Nigerian Food TV" on YouTube demonstrates the potential of digital storytelling in attracting culinary tourists (Adeola & Evans, 2022). Furthermore, partnerships with diaspora-owned restaurants abroad can serve as culinary embassies, offering promotional materials and curated food experiences that encourage travel to Nigeria.

Fourth, regional food tourism circuits should be developed to highlight Nigeria's diverse culinary traditions. For instance, the southwest could offer "Yoruba Food Trails," featuring visits to local markets, palm wine tastings, and interactive cooking sessions with indigenous chefs. The north could promote "Hausa Spice Routes," showcasing suya grilling techniques and traditional durbar feasts. These circuits should be integrated with cultural and heritage tourism, creating multi-experiential packages that appeal to a broad range of travelers (Timothy & Ron, 2019).

Fifth, private sector investment in food tourism infrastructure is essential. Boutique hotels, eco-lodges, and culinary resorts should incorporate Nigerian food experiences into their offerings, such as farm-to-table dining, cooking classes, and chef-led market tours. Food-themed accommodations, like the "Spice Lodges" in Zanzibar, have proven successful in other African markets and could be replicated in Nigeria

(Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). Additionally, venture capital support for food startups, such as artisanal spice producers and organic farms, can enhance the supply chain for high-quality local ingredients.

Finally, academic and industry research on Nigerian food tourism must be expanded. Universities should establish culinary tourism research centers to study consumer trends, economic impacts, and sustainable practices. Collaboration with international organizations like the World Food Travel Association can provide benchmarking data and best practices for Nigeria's growing food tourism sector (World Food Travel Association, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Nigeria stands at a pivotal moment where its rich culinary heritage can become a transformative force in its tourism industry. While challenges such as infrastructure gaps, inconsistent standards, and limited global awareness persist, the opportunities for growth are substantial. By implementing strategic policies, investing in culinary branding, and fostering collaborations between government, businesses, and local communities, Nigeria can position itself as Africa's next great food tourism destination.

The development of food tourism is not merely an economic imperative but also a cultural one. Promoting Nigerian cuisine globally preserves culinary traditions, supports small-scale farmers and vendors, and fosters national pride. As global travelers increasingly seek authentic and immersive experiences, Nigeria's diverse flavors, vibrant markets, and communal dining culture offer a unique competitive advantage. With coordinated efforts, the nation can unlock the full potential of its gastronomic wealth, ensuring that Nigerian cuisine takes its rightful place on the world's culinary tourism map.

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