

An exploration of Memorable food experiences in Zimbabwe: towards food tourism development.

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Abstract

Food experiences are being promoted by several countries leading to developing and enhancing food tourism. Zimbabwe has unique culinary potential yet there is a gap in literature on food tourism in most African countries Zimbabwe included. This paper explores memorable food experiences towards food tourism development. This study was carried out in Harare as the capital city of Zimbabwe and in Victoria Falls the major tourism destination. 10 service providers responsible for designing, facilitating and marketing food experiences were purposively sampled. Twenty (20) international tourists were conveniently sampled. Interviews were conducted with research participants. Data collected was analyzed using thematic analysis. The major themes that emerged from the studies are that food experiences can be categorized as authentic traditional food experiences, consumption of unique exotic foods, Culinary Festivals and Events, Farm and Agricultural experiences food and beverage tours and Dining in unexpected settings. The study will benefit various stakeholders who have a role in facilitating and staging food experiences in Zimbabwe. The study recommends that food experiences that are found in various tourism destinations be documented so that they can be marketed and promoted. Food trails and food tours should also be packaged. This will help attract food enthusiasts to Zimbabwe thereby leading to food tourism development. Documenting and marketing food experiences will give the country competitive advantage and give tourists more reasons to visit other than flora and fauna. The findings can inform Zimbabwe's tourism strategy on elements of destination Zimbabwe that can be facilitated, staged and co-created into memorable food experiences.

Keywords: Food tourism, memorable food experiences.

Introduction

Food experiences may be in the form of experiences which are production related or which are consumption related (Mohamed *et al.*, 2020). Waheed and Kumar (2024) observed that there is need for food experience products to be developed and presented to various tourist markets. Food is a fundamental part of the tourism sector that attracts tourists and also determines their satisfaction with the destination (Hiamey *et al.*, 2020; Knollenberg, 2021). There are countries which are well known for their cuisines such as France, Italy and Thailand, however, Zimbabwe is less known for its food yet it has foods, serving styles, dining customs, preparation and cooking methods from various ethnic groups Consequently, many destinations market their food and associated activities and experiences to attract tourists (Jeaheng & Han, 2020). Given this

exploration and the resultant promotion of food experiences, tourists can also travel to Zimbabwe solely for the food and related experiences and this can lead to the development of food tourism. Relevant literature will be reviewed below.

Literature review

Given that establishing food experiences is an important step towards food tourism development, there is need to explore food experiences in Zimbabwe. Yang *et al.*, (2024) found that tourism destinations are now concerned with providing tourists with memorable food experiences, as such there is need to unearth such food related experiences. According to Wolf (2008), visitors mostly prefer dining out when they travel and they often spend much on food and beverages and other food related experiences. Shenoy (2005) concurs and further denotes that eating is an important part of the visitor experience and the visitor must not only consume what they are hearing and seeing but what they can taste at a particular destination. Long (2004), mentions that food may be interpreted as a lens to understanding the destinations' local culture.

There has been considerable growth in food tourism and it has become one of the most vibrant and innovative tourism sub-sectors (Mnguni & Giampiccoli, 2022). García-Pérez and Castillo-Ortiz (2024) found that there are limited studies on food experiences in Africa. Many African countries except for South Africa are lagging behind in terms of Food tourism development and Zimbabwe is not an exception Food tourism has financial benefits to a country. More than a third of expenditure in the tourism sector is spent on food since it is an essential part of the travel experience (Jeaheng & Han, 2020). Food thus serves to attract tourists and enhance their experiences at a destination while at the same time benefiting local economies and promoting sustainable development through the use of local resources (Mnguni & Giampiccoli, 2022).

Objective of the study

To determine memorable food experiences in Zimbabwe: towards food tourism development.

Methods and Materials

This study is qualitative in nature. Findings will help stakeholders to know the various food related experiences that can be experienced and facilitated in Zimbabwe. Twenty (20) international tourists were conveniently sampled from Victoria Falls and Harare respectively. The study was conducted in Harare because it is the capital city of Zimbabwe and tourists usually visit this destination. Victoria Falls was selected for the study because it is a major tourism hub. Nine (9) food experience service providers and one (1) key informant were purposively sampled. Interviews were conducted with these stakeholders to gather data on the food experiences they know or have participated in. Using interviews allowed the researchers to explore memorable food experiences that can be inculcated in the development of food tourism in Zimbabwe. The data was analysed using the thematic analysis approach. Data was transcribed and the researchers identified emerging themes from the interviews. The findings are presented in the next section.

Results and discussion

It is worth noting that, while the survey was conducted in Victoria Falls and Harare, the data for this study could extend beyond these two locations because data provided by service providers focused primarily on everything that Zimbabwe has to offer in terms of food-related unforgettable experiences. Furthermore, the involvement of a destination marketing organisation (DMO) representative broadened the scope of the study, providing a comprehensive understanding of Zimbabwe as a destination. This study relies solely on tourist insights about their experiences with the sites they had visited at the time of data collection. The research participants were asked to detail food related experiences found in various food settings they visited in Zimbabwe. The major themes that emerged were; authentic traditional food experiences, consumption of unique exotic foods, Culinary Festivals and Events, Farm and Agricultural experiences food and beverage tours and Dining in unexpected settings.

Authentic traditional food experiences

Food that offers tourists a chance to enjoy authentic dishes and experiences have been identified as one of the categories of food related experiences. Many participants (P1, P26) highlighted the richness of Zimbabwe's traditional ethnic food. The research participants had this to say;

In sharing her experiences, P1 asserted that,

... I visited a local village and participated in harvesting maize and then roasting it on an open fire and just learning about their culture was good. The other time I was in Zim I went to Boma and experienced lots of dishes that were tasty, ate the mopani worm for the first time and was given a certificate, I was dressed in some local cloth for the dinner, oh and we had the drumming session, they taught how to play the drum and we played the drum and danced as they sang in their native language. I really enjoyed that. There is this place I also went to and we ate local thick porridge with buffalo and cow feet, the taste was amazing.

Another tourist, P26 pointed out that,

I had the opportunity to sit down with a lot of local ladies and try some local delicacies like peanuts stew and the baobab and I found that eating, especially in Zimbabwe, was a lot more communal than what I was used to.

The study results show the richness of Zimbabwe's traditional food culture. This is in synchrony with Mintz and Du Bois (2002), who states that food is a fundamental part cultural heritage and offers an insight into the cultural identity and acts as a conduit for conveying traditions. There are establishments that are known for offering authentic food experiences, tourists who desire to taste Zimbabwe's indigenous dishes can visit such establishments. There is a constellation of activities which one can be exposed to such as cooking *sadza* on an open fire, grinding peanuts to make peanut butter among a host of other activities. These activities are immersive food experiences that one can partake in Zimbabwe. Food can be consumed in a communal dining and by so doing tourist can be immersed into the culture of the people as they will be sharing the meal.

Consumption of unique and exotic foods

Another characteristic that emerged was the eating of unusual and exotic foods. Several interviewees (21, 1, 10) described eating distinctive Zimbabwean foods, particularly Mopani worms, game meats (crocodile, kudu), and local delicacies such as baobab and peanut stew, as a gastronomic experience.

P21 said,

...apart from just eating the food Mopani worms okay you don't want to be going and picking them I guess but it is something that's unique okay Sub-Saharan Africa will offer you crocodile they will offer you various game meat but I'm not sure if you can get Mopani worms anywhere else...

P 25 had this to say,

The food related food experiences found in Zimbabwe is KwaMereki (where people buy meat and braai and get to eat out door) There will also be music of all different kinds and entertainment.

Findings concur with Rozin (2006), who found that novel food experiences evoke both curiosity and a sense of adventure, which contributes to lasting food memories. Tourists enjoy trying new dishes especially the neophilics however, some tourists have neophobia and do not like tasting unique dishes. This implies that there is need to offer a wide range of foods from different countries so that neophobics who do not like to taste new foods can eat food they are accustomed to from their country of origin.

Culinary Festivals and Events

Interviews with service providers revealed that Zimbabwe has a variety of wine and food festivals that can provide travelers with exceptional food-related tourism experiences. These celebrations range from tiny neighborhood gatherings like 'nhimbe' and 'doro remukwerera' (rain-making rites) to larger ones with global appeal. Community-level festivals are typically only accessible to tourists by chance because they are not on the national schedule of events and are more seasonal. Above all, they are claimed to be sacred and part of Zimbabwe's well guarded cultural and history, which not everyone has access to or participates in.

However, the ability to participate in even a small portion of the food-related activities that define these events would present travelers with a cultural immersion that they would never forget. Bigger public events and celebrations provide travelers with a variety of experiences, including food and beverage tasting, food exhibitions, cookery demonstrations, and performing arts, which make them majestic. These sentiments are expressed in the following voices:

Participant 15 an overlander and tour guide made interesting remarks,

"As a guide who has travelled places here in SADC, I can say Zimbabwe offers memorable food experiences through the variety of food served on cultural festivals such as rainmaking ceremonies. I know they call them 'doro remukwerera' elsewhere but I am Tonga myself so let me talk of the 'malende' or 'mpande' and the 'monze' as they are referred to in other Tonga groups. When I am travelling with my groups on these trips that cut across Africa, and I am in Zimbabwe during a time I know there are such ceremonies, I always take my guests to the ceremonies. What is very memorable about these events, even though tourists do not get rites to rituals performed in the inner rooms by the rain-

maker, is the increase in the tempo of song and dance once the rain-maker communicates the message about the rains and the harvest for the upcoming season. The celebratory atmosphere in which the food is served afterwards is just hilarious. Even though tourists sometimes do not eat the food, they just love watching these events unfold. Truly these are very rare instances but very memorable. I think I have had only three encounters over my lifetime as a guide. It is more than fifteen years now”

Participant 23 a Head Chef from Harare said,

“Though not well marketed, the Harare International Food and Drink Festival brings together local and international food vendors, chefs, and beverage companies annually. Visitors will be allowed to sample a wide range of contemporary and traditional dishes from the diverse regions of Zimbabwe. Food lovers also indulge in a variety of beverages, inclusive of local craft beers and wines.

A key informant from ZTA opined that,

Festivals offer a lot of upscale food experiences here in Zimbabwe. We have the likes of the Gango festival that celebrates the cultural significance of a traditional snack made from cornmeal, peanuts, and spices, originating from the southern region of Zimbabwe. We have the Chimanimani Food festival which is a celebration of local cuisine and local produce in the scenic Chimanimani region. We also have the Harare International Festival of the Arts (HIFA). Its last edition was in 2019. It featured the Curry Night- a popular event which celebrated Zimbabwean and Indian cuisine. Local chefs and restaurants would offer a diverse range of curry dishes, displaying the fusion of flavors and cooking techniques between the two culinary traditions. Visitors enjoyed the night of delicious curries, live cultural performances, and a whole lot of lively entertainment. Then the biggest of them all so far is the Victoria Falls Carnival. This one combine adventure, music and food for a memorable experience.

It is vital to remember that food festivals provide two-sided experiences, appealing to both food customers and culinary professionals. They provide tourists with insights into the primary highlights of a country's rich culinary legacy, while travelling culinary artisans have the opportunity to share culinary skills. These findings support Yang *et al.* (2020), who believe that food festivals are at the center of culinary tourism. Food plays an important moderating function in any type of gathering or event, regardless of size. An appreciation for local cuisine and food-related customs is a ubiquitous component of the travel experience, which has become a must-do activity for the majority of international tourists. In the Zimbabwean context, it is important to note that these festivals exist, and service providers recognize their ability to create memorable culinary experiences. However, they appear to consistently confront a poor growth trajectory, limiting tourists' capacities to encounter one at random when they arrive, whether as business, leisure, or adventure travelers.

Farm and Agricultural experiences

Local farm visits are a prominent component of Victoria Falls' tour program. During data collection, a review of tour operators' posted tour packages revealed that practically all tour operators visited at least one village, whether on a half-day or full-day tour. Interviewees had this to say about farm-related experiences.

Participant 13 an Executive chef said,

What I know is that besides the fine dining experiences we offer here, or in hotels, tourists are normally taken to local farming areas and villages such as Kompisi, Mukuni and Monde. I have been to Mukuni village myself. You know, the village offers tourists the chance to explore traditional agricultural lifestyles in a rural setting. Depending on the season, tourists participate in farming activities such as planting, weeding, and harvesting, while they learn about traditional farming practices from the local farmers. Tourists also get a chance to witness the processes of making traditional food products and have a taste of local cuisine. It might not seem enjoyable to us because we are used to it, but I tell you, international tourists love it. Some never got a chance to experience farm life, worse still very fresh food, like plucking a real pumpkin from the pumpkin plant then preparing it for breakfast.

As Participant 30 the ZTA official noted,

Harare is generally surrounded by farms that tourists can visit on appointment. I cannot pinpoint as many but the one coming to my mind just now is Chisipiti Farm, located just outside Harare and KwaTerry which is quite far from Harare in Ingezi. Tourists visiting the farms can engage in activities such as milking cows, herding cattle, and tending the crops.

Participant 6 Tourist said,

"I did the Lion Encounter Village Tour and Dinner and it was awesome. Basically, what The Lion Encounter organization did yesterday is, they took us as a group to a village specifically for a traditional Zimbabwean dinner. We had a guided tour of the Mpisi village, where we interacted with residents, learned about the community's customs, and witnessed traditional activities such as the feeding of local chickens. The tour culminated into a communal dinner prepared by a local chef. We had thick maize porridge (sadza), stewed spinach, grilled goat meat and these local chickens for dinner. For me, it is a memorable food experience because yesterday I immersed myself in the local culture of eating with my hands and eating meat from animals that I have seen being slaughtered. It was funny. It is my first time."

The most often visited villages were Mukuni, Monde, and Kompisi. According to interview data, in addition to recreational activities, these local farm tours offer distinctive dining experiences. Seeing crop fields, interacting with animals, and learning about sustainable farming practices helps travelers appreciate the products on their plates. This understanding has the potential to transform a simple meal into a valuable and memorable experience for Zimbabwe visitors. Furthermore, the researchers discovered that farm visits boost sensory engagement beyond the plate. That is, agricultural visits involve more than just taste. These study findings support Birch and Memery (2020) discovery that local farm visits effectively bridge the gap between consumers and food producers. This helps tourists comprehend, enjoy, and emotionally connect with the cuisine they eat in a destination.

The findings are consistent with Yeboah and Ashie (2024), who believe that farm-to-table activities such as visiting organic farms, foraging for ingredients, and creating meals using local goods are all instances of farm-to-table activities that fall under the category of food tourism. In terms of farm-to-folk experiences, visitors can learn about local gastronomic traditions through hands-on cooking classes in which they prepare meals from their own freshly harvested produce. These findings are consistent with Guruge (2020), who stated that farm to folk experiences allow

guests to explore a community's diverse food landscape while also developing a deep awareness for the link between farming techniques and the nation's unique gastronomic delights. This is in line with growing trends on slow movement.

Beverage related tours

Stakeholders that facilitate and deliver food experiences identified various beverage related tours that tourists can participate in when they visit Zimbabwe. Some participants interviewed, like P3, had this to say.

There is growing interest in how beer tastes to the extent that nowadays some breweries are opening up for brewing tours, introducing tap rooms, or even setting-up on site museums. In Victoria falls we have our very own The River Brewing Company which offers brewing tours. They have their signature tour named, 'The Zim in a glass' which features a wide range of delicious craft ales and non-alcoholic sodas made from the finest local ingredients and a few from the United States of America and Germany. However, it is not very popular but it's a must experience for beer lovers.

P30s' sentiments show that tea and coffee plantation tours offer a blend of scenic beauty and agricultural education. P3 brought out another element of beverage tours that tourists can participate in when they visit Zimbabwe. Findings are in sync with Papcunová et al (2024) and Doloreux et al., 2024's arguments for brewery tours, where they found that brewing tours are emerging as a vital component of food and gastronomic experiences that create lasting memories and promote the eagerness for repeat visits in tourists. Further, they alluded that by focusing on local brewing traditions and the consumption of locally produced beverages, beer tasting tours can be marketed. Beverage tours seem not to be popular in Zimbabwe unlike in other countries that are renowned for wine tourism. This may be because Zimbabwe has limited brewery facilities and those available are not being capitalised for food tourism and are kept restricted yet they can attract those interested in viewing scenery related to brewery ingredients, their processing, production and consumption.

Dining in unexpected settings

On dining in unexpected settings, an interviewee stated that:

The bush dinner at Jafuta conservancy lodge is really memorable. It was a fusion of cuisines that blended African flavors with international food service standard. It was a buffet like we always had but I enjoyed being under the stars and surrounded by the natural environment while I eat my food (P17)

P10 said, *for me dinner after having a sunset boat cruise on the Zambezi explorer was beautiful. The sound of water, the comfortable settings and the top-notch food and beverage service standards.*

Then P27 a respondent from Harare appraised the value of *Mbare Musika* street food markets and the popular *KwaMereki* as memorable food experiences offered in Zimbabwe.

In the heart of the city, there is Mbare Musika. This bustling market has a variety of street foods ranging from roasted corn on the cob, locally referred to as 'chibage chakagochwa',

different types of grilled meats, fried chicken, samosas, and traditional snacks like fried 'matemba' (small fish) and roasted peanuts. Tourists can savor these delightful treats while experiencing the vibrant atmosphere of the market, interacting with available local vendors, and exploring the lively street food culture of Harare. Tourists can also visit KwaMereki which houses a number of informal vendors offering street food and they can enjoy sadza with braaied meat, offals, cow head or heels with salads. Patrons eat food whilst placing food on the boot of their cars whilst they play their own music and dance and socialize with other people.

P6 said, "I enjoyed sitting around the fire and listening to stories shared by the villagers".

Findings support views of various authors who assert that tourists travel around the globe in order to experience food tourism products, activities like bush dinners, boat cruises with meals, picnic game drive, consuming street food, touring food and wine factories, participating in food festivals, food tours and consuming food (Quan & Wang, 2004; Smith and Xiao, 2008; Richards, 2015; FolgadoFernández et al., 2017; Antón et al., 2019.) On the other hand, the response from P6 emphasizes the social and cultural aspects of food consumption. Communal dining around a fire fosters a sense of community and cultural exchange, which is a key element in many traditional societies (Fischler, 2011). The act of sharing stories while eating reinforces oral traditions and strengthens social bonds (Sutton, 2001).

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to explore memorable food experiences in Zimbabwe: towards Food tourism development. It is clear that whilst Zimbabwe is endowed with rich culinary experiences, more needs to be done for them to be known and for them to be a pull factor to attract tourists. When tourists visit a destination in some instances they can see where the local ingredients are produced (visiting, farms and vineyards), they can witness the preparation and processing of ingredients, and they can appreciate the culture and traditions that supports how indigenous dishes are prepared and served. Food forms the basis for branding and marketing the destinations food experiences. Many destinations can capitalize on using food and related food experiences to stimulate tourists travel to Zimbabwe. Future studies should be quantitative in nature to quantify tourist demand for food experiences so as to ascertain the most popular types of food experiences and those that need improvement and marketing.

Recommendations

The study makes the following recommendations:

Documenting food experiences

It involves creating records of culinary events, restaurant reviews, and food production processes. These records can take the form of photographs, videos, written descriptions, and oral histories. This documentation helps to preserve culinary heritage, promote food-related businesses, and attract tourists interested in authentic food experiences. Furthermore, it can be used to analyze trends, improve service quality, and develop marketing strategies for food tourism destinations.

Creating digital platforms

Digital platforms that can be used in documenting and gathering details on food. This can be automated. These can help increase awareness on the various food experiences. This can be region or as per Zimbabwe's diverse ethnic groups as they are unique. Specific strategies for documenting food experiences.

Developing Food trails

Food trails serve as a strategic tool for destination marketing, with the aim of augmenting visitor numbers and promoting diverse goods and/or producers within a particular region or locale (Everett, 2016). It is possible to describe a trail as a narrow linear path that is primarily intended for people to travel for recreational purposes (MacNamara, & Dewhurst, 2013). Medina and Tresserras (2018) defined the trail as a path that follows in the footsteps of both the food and the people who ate it, as well as an adventure where you can enjoy both. There are various ways to experience a trail, including going on a bus trip, walking excursions of local markets and restaurants, or engaging in self-guided tours (Broadway, 2019). They aim to bring together many places with a food-related theme, offering a cohesive and comprehensive experience for visitors. These trails provide a holistic culinary and gastronomic narrative that explores the interconnectedness of individuals, processes, locales, and products (Timothy & Boyd, 2015).

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