

THE POTENTIAL OF LOCAL CUISINE IN PROMOTING HEALTH TOURISM OF PHUKET

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Extended abstract

This study explores the potential of local cuisine in promoting health tourism in Phuket, Thailand, a province known for its multicultural culinary heritage rooted in Thai, Chinese, Malay, Muslim, and Hindu traditions. As global demand for wellness tourism grows, integrating traditional food with health-focused experiences offers new opportunities for sustainable destination development. Using a qualitative research approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 20 key informants, including culinary experts, local entrepreneurs, health professionals, and both domestic and international tourists. Thematic analysis revealed that indigenous ingredients such as Phuket pineapple, Ya Chong (Hydrilla), and Som Khwai (Garcinia cowa) possess notable nutritional and medicinal properties. These are used in culturally significant dishes like Gaeng Som Sapparot, Tom Som, and Bue Thod, which can be adapted for health-conscious travelers. The study concludes that these local foods have strong potential to be transformed into wellness-oriented culinary products. With recipe adjustments to meet health standards and culturally sensitive presentation, Phuket's cuisine can enhance the province's identity as a health tourism destination. This research offers strategic insights for integrating gastronomy with public health, cultural preservation, and tourism development.

Keywords: Local Cuisine, Health Tourism, Phuket

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Introduction

Local food is a product of indigenous wisdom, deeply intertwined with the culture and way of life of local communities. It incorporates herbs and natural ingredients found in the surrounding environment, valued not only for their nutritional qualities but also for their medicinal properties (Kansiri, Panatsaya, & Chulaeware, 2017). The local food culture encompasses beliefs and values related to food, the selection and preparation processes, consumption patterns, and the social roles of food. Therefore, food is not merely a source of sustenance but also a key factor contributing to physical well-being. A balanced and diverse diet supports good health and protects against various diseases.

Southern Thai cuisine, in particular, is characterized by five distinct food values and relies heavily on the use of vegetables and herbs. Phuket Province, located in southern Thailand, is well known for its rich culinary traditions. In 2015, it became Thailand's first city to be designated as a UNESCO City of Gastronomy, a recognition of its culinary diversity influenced by Thai, Chinese, and Muslim cultures (UNESCO, 2016). Local food in Phuket plays a central role in festivals, community traditions, and everyday life, and has evolved through creative practices that combine indigenous ingredients into unique and appealing dishes.

In 2024, Phuket welcomed 13,141,410 domestic and international tourists, generating approximately 497.52 billion baht in tourism revenue (Ministry of Tourism & Sports, 2025). These statistics underscore Phuket's strong potential as a tourist destination. Beyond its natural and architectural attractions, the province's cultural heritage including its local cuisine serves as a powerful draw for visitors (Chalida, Geerana, & Unyanee, 2020). Culinary tourism in Phuket includes well-known local dishes such as Mee Hokkien, O-Aew, Oh Tao, Pork Bone Soup, and Salted Fish, offering tourists a taste of the region's unique gastronomic identity (Wan & Choi, 2020; Okumus & Cetin, 2018).

Thailand's National Strategy for Tourism (2018–2037) emphasizes creative and cultural tourism. The sub-plan on creative tourism highlights the importance of utilizing knowledge, innovation, and cultural heritage to add value to tourism services and products. This includes historical sites, traditional lifestyles, community-made products, Thai cuisine, and Thai traditional medicine (Secretariat of the Senate, 2025). The health tourism strategy (2023–2027), aligned with Thailand's 20-Year Public Health Strategic Plan, aims to establish Phuket as a global health tourism hub. The strategy promotes the integration of modern technology with traditional knowledge to offer world-class wellness services and experiences.

Phuket's health tourism initiatives are supported by the Ministry of Public Health, which is working to position the province not only as a premier tourist destination but also as a center for cultural and culinary tourism. Healthy food, rooted in local traditions and made from native ingredients, is becoming increasingly popular as people seek alternatives for better health. These local dishes can be integrated into wellness tourism activities, offering both cultural richness and health benefits (Chaiyasain, 2019; Nilubon & Puri, 2024).

The research study of *The Potential of Local Cuisine in Promoting Health Tourism of Phuket* aims to study for explore the potential of Phuket's local cuisine in promoting health tourism. Which will be useful for promoting and creating value for local food And driving local food to health tourism activities To further enhance the health tourism potential of Phuket.

Objectives

To explore the potential of Phuket's local cuisine in promoting health tourism.

Research Methodology

1. Populations and Sample

The population for this research includes stakeholders involved in gastronomy and health tourism in Phuket. The sample was selected purposively to ensure a comprehensive representation of key informants relevant to the study. A total of 20 participants were interviewed, comprising food academics and professors, local food wisdom experts, local restaurant business operators, health tourism professionals, food nutritionists, representatives from relevant government agencies, and both domestic and international tourists.

2. Research Tools

The primary research tool used in this study was a semi-structured in-depth interview guide. The guide was designed to elicit detailed insights into the relationship between local culinary practices and their potential in health tourism promotion. Questions were open-ended and flexible, allowing for probing and exploration of emerging themes during the interviews.

3. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with the selected participants. Interviews were carried out face-to-face and/or via online platforms depending on availability and convenience. Each interview was recorded (with consent) and transcribed verbatim for accuracy. Field notes and observations were also documented to supplement the interview data.

4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data. After transcription, the data were coded using thematic coding techniques to identify recurring themes, patterns, and conceptual linkages. The analysis focused on understanding how local food practices in Phuket can contribute to health tourism, drawing out key themes that reflect stakeholders' perspectives and experiences.

Conclusion and Discussion

Conclusion

The study revealed that Phuket is characterized by its multicultural identity, which is prominently reflected in its traditional cuisine. This culinary diversity is a result of the integration of Thai, Chinese, Malay, Muslim, and Hindu influences. These food traditions are not only cultural representations but also have been transformed into tourism products in the form of food tourism, which is gaining popularity among both domestic and international tourists.

Simultaneously, Phuket possesses abundant natural resources that can be leveraged to develop a robust health-oriented food industry. Several local ingredients stand out for their distinctive qualities and potential for culinary innovation, particularly in promoting health tourism. These include:

Phuket Pineapple – Registered as a Geographical Indication (GI) product in 2009, this pineapple variety is renowned for its sweet taste, crisp texture, juicy yellow flesh, and distinctive aroma. It is unique to Phuket's soil and climate. The fruit is often used in local dishes such as Gaeng Som Sapparot (spicy sour curry with pineapple), highlighting its potential to be developed into a health-conscious menu item rich in natural vitamins and dietary fiber.

Ya Chong – A native aquatic plant found in clean freshwater sources, characterized by its slender, oblong shape and green coloration. Locally, it is used in a traditional snack called Bue Thod, which involves battering the plant with seasoned flour, topping it with shrimp, and deep-frying it until crisp. Served with a mildly spicy and sweet dipping sauce, this dish represents the community's wisdom in utilizing local plants. It can be adapted for modern dietary preferences and promoted as a nutritious and culturally significant health food.

Som Khwai – A sour fruit belonging to the same family as *Garcinia atroviridis*, widely found in southern Thailand, particularly in Phuket. It is known for its large size and abundant flesh. Locals commonly use it in curries, especially Gaeng Som or Tom Som (sour soup). Recent medical research has shown that Som Khwai contains medicinal properties, including antioxidant activity and digestive benefits. Dishes like Tom Som Som Khwai offer opportunities to be included in wellness tourism packages due to their functional health benefits.

Qualitative analysis suggests that these three traditional dishes Gaeng Som Sapparot, Tom Som Pak Som Rom, and Bue Thod have strong potential to be developed into menu items for health tourism in Phuket. To enhance their appeal to health-conscious travelers, it may be necessary to adapt their recipes to reduce excessive salt, fat, or sugar content, and to modernize their presentation. These adjustments would help align the dishes with the expectations of international health tourists, elderly visitors, and wellness-focused consumers.

The findings demonstrate that Phuket's local cuisine is not merely a cultural legacy but can be transformed into a value-added tourism product that supports the development of integrated health tourism. By aligning with the national strategies for creative economy and wellness city development, traditional food can play a key role in elevating Phuket as an international hub for sustainable and health-centered tourism.

Discussion

The findings underscore that Phuket's local cuisine, characterized by its multicultural influences and unique indigenous ingredients, holds significant potential to enhance the province's health tourism sector. The integration of traditional dishes into wellness tourism aligns with global trends favoring authentic, health-oriented culinary experiences.

Phuket Pineapple, recognized as a Geographical Indication (GI) product since 2009, exemplifies the province's commitment to preserving and promoting its unique agricultural heritage. Its distinctive sweet and tangy flavor profile has not only made it a culinary staple but also a symbol of Phuket's gastronomic identity. Innovative initiatives, such as transforming these pineapples into premium gift items for festivals, have added economic value and cultural significance to this local produce.

Similarly, Som Khwai (*Garcinia cowa*), a native sour fruit, has been promoted as a GI product to boost the province's agricultural and food industries, generating sustainable income for locals. The fruit's unique properties and traditional uses in local dishes highlight its potential as a health-promoting ingredient in wellness tourism offerings.

Ya Chong, an indigenous aquatic plant, is traditionally used in dishes like "Bue Thod," reflecting the community's culinary ingenuity. Its incorporation into local diets showcases the potential of underutilized native ingredients in developing health-focused culinary experiences.

The strategic development of these local ingredients into health-oriented dishes can position Phuket as a leading destination for wellness tourism. According to the Global Wellness Institute, wellness tourists are high-yield travelers, spending on average 130% more than the average tourist. By capitalizing on this trend, Phuket can enhance its tourism revenue while promoting sustainable agricultural practices and preserving its culinary heritage.

Furthermore, initiatives like the "Street Food Good Health from Local to Global" program aim to elevate the street food experience in Phuket, serving as a model for other provinces. Such programs not only improve food safety and hygiene standards but also promote local dishes as healthy and authentic culinary options for tourists.

In conclusion, Phuket's unique blend of multicultural culinary traditions and indigenous ingredients presents a valuable opportunity to develop health-focused tourism offerings. By integrating these elements into wellness tourism strategies, the province can enhance its appeal to health-conscious travelers, support local economies, and preserve its rich cultural heritage.

Research recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion of this study, several research recommendations are proposed to enhance the development and integration of local food into Phuket's health tourism industry:

1. Development of Standardized Health-Friendly Recipes

Future research should focus on reformulating traditional dishes using local ingredient such as Phuket pineapple, ya chong, and som khwai to create standardized health-friendly versions. Nutritional analysis and dietary assessments should be conducted to ensure these dishes meet international wellness standards while preserving their cultural identity.

2. Consumer Perception and Market Segmentation Studies

Further studies should explore domestic and international tourist perceptions of health-oriented local food in Phuket. Understanding preferences, expectations, and health concerns across different market segments (e.g., elderly tourists, wellness seekers, vegetarians) will help in tailoring food tourism experiences more effectively.

3. Integration Models for Wellness Tourism

Research should investigate models for integrating local food into broader health tourism experiences, such as wellness retreats, cooking classes, farm-to-table tours, and herbal remedy workshops. This includes studying the impact of such integration on tourist satisfaction and destination branding.

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