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Crossing Culinary Boundaries in a Mountain Foodscape: Dish-Level Food-Choice Repertoires among Tourists in Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract
Local food has been researched in literature frequently with general concepts such as satisfaction, authenticity, local image and loyalty. This was helpful but it didn't address the simpler question: what food tourists ate when they visited a place. This study has proposed a dish-level approach to tourist food behaviour and the concept of culinary boundary crossing, which implied the tourists' shift from familiar or recognizable foods to more place-specific, culturally embedded, ingredient-distinctive and sensory-risk oriented foods. The paper focused on Himachal Pradesh, and analysed the tourists' reported consumption of particular Himachali and regional food items to identify food-choice repertoires and classify tourists on the basis of their level of involvement with the mountain foodscape. The findings revealed that the tourists reacted to Himachali cuisine in unbalanced manner; some stayed limited to familiar or limited food items while others extended their food choices and tastes to local foods in a broader and deeper range. The study employed a food-tourism research approach adding a fresh perspective to the research about food evaluation, putting the emphasis not on the food as a whole, but on the food at the dish level. It also provided hands-on knowledge in the preparation of food trails, regional tasting menus, food interpretation for the tourist at the destination and culinary experiences, which pushed the tourist from familiar foods to the deeper aspects of the Himachali food culture.

Keywords: Culinary boundary crossing, Food-choice repertoire, culinary tourism, Himachali food, tourist segmentation, foodscape, dish-level behaviour, mountain tourism.

INTRODUCTION

Food is one of the most salient experiences in which tourists are exposed to cultural differences when travelling (Boniface, 2003; Long, 2004; Hjalager, 2004; World Tourism Organization, 2012). Consuming food at a place is not just a biological necessity but also a social act, which involves encountering unfamiliar food and cooking methods, the ways in which it is presented, local terminology, and regionally coded ideas of taste (Fischler, 1988; Bell & Valentine, 1997; Montanari, 2006; Heldke, 2003). In this way, food is a perfect example of a phenomenon to study as a way for tourists to reconcile comfort and curiosity, the known and the unknown, the familiar with the unfamiliar, and everyday consumption with place-based discovery (Long, 2004; Boniface, 2003; Hjalager, 2004; Getz, Robinson, Andersson, & Vujicic, 2014).

The existing discussion on food tourism has generated important insights, but a large part of this work examines cuisine through broad categories such as motivation, preference, attraction, experience, or destination marketing (Hjalager, 2004; Ignatov & Smith, 2006; Getz et al., 2014; Pérez-Priego, García-Moreno, Gómez-Casero, & Caridad y López del Río, 2019). These studies show that tourists differ in their food interests, but they often leave open the question of what tourists actually taste within a regional cuisine. A tourist who tastes only one familiar food item and a tourist who tries ten regionally distinctive dishes are both food consumers, but their engagement with the destination foodscape is clearly not the same (Long, 2004; Updhyay & Sharma, 2014; Gyimóthy & Mykletun, 2009; Hjalager, 2004). This paper argued that tourist food behaviour should be examined at the level of the food-choice repertoire. A repertoire refers to the set of dishes tasted by a tourist during travel. It is more specific than a general food attitude and more behaviourally grounded than an intention-based construct (Ignatov & Smith, 2006; Updhyay & Sharma, 2014; Dolnicar, 2002; Wedel & Kamakura, 2000). Repertoire analysis makes it possible to distinguish tourists who remain within familiar food choices from those who move into iconic, region-specific, ingredient-distinctive, or sensory-risk foods. This is especially useful in destinations where cuisine is not represented by one dish alone but by a layered culinary field (Bessière, 1998; Boniface, 2003; Long, 2004; Montanari, 2006).

This idea, called culinary boundary crossing, was developed in the study to account for this movement. The culinary boundary crossing refers to the encounter of tourists with a food that is unfamiliar or not easily recognized by them, that requires increased local exposure, curiosity, cultural openness or sensory negotiation. The concept is based on the Sociology and Anthropology of Food that sees the act of eating as one of incorporation, distinction, identity and encounter with otherness (Fischler, 1988; Bourdieu, 1984; Heldke, 2003; Johnston & Baumann, 2010). It is also linked to food neophobia and food adventure research, as unfamiliar food can create hesitations, enjoyment, curiosity and excitement (Pliner & Hobden, 1992; Gyimóthy & Mykletun, 2009; Boniface, 2003; Long, 2004). Recently, domestic and international interest in India's diverse regional gastronomies has seen a massive upswing, transitioning from standardized pan-Indian menus to hyper-local, ingredient-driven regional cuisines (Gupta, Khanna, & Gupta, 2021). Within this context, the area of Himachal Pradesh provided a highly suitable setting as it had food traditions such as ritual meals, preparation of cereal and legume food, fermented foods, local beverages, regional snacks, sweets, non-vegetarian food and place specific food practices (Thakur, Savitri & Bhalla,

2004; Savitri & Bhalla, 2007; Bessière, 1998; Montanari, 2006). Recognizing that a destination foodscape is not a static menu but a dynamic, layered environment shaped by tourist encounters (Park & Widyanta, 2022), tourists can enter the Himachali foodscape by the familiar foods (momos and thukpa) or more familiar Himachali foods (Dhaam, Siddu, Madra, Babru, Mithha) or enter deeper into regional specialties (Bhey, Aktori, Patrode, Sur, Chha Gosht, Kullu Trout Fish, Luchi Poti). These dishes are not as familiar, available and sensorial as those of tourists (Pliner & Hobden, 1992; Gyimóthy & Mykletun, 2009; Thakur et al., 2004; Savitri & Bhalla, 2007).

The present paper therefore avoided a satisfaction-loyalty pathway and instead asked a different question: how deeply do tourists enter Himachal Pradesh's mountain foodscape through the specific dishes they report tasting? This question gave the study a distinct analytical identity. The paper did not develop a new psychological scale, nor did it treat segment labels as pre-existing constructs. Instead, it used dish-level binary tasting indicators to identify data-derived tourist food-choice segments (Dolnicar, 2002; Ignatov & Smith, 2006; Wedel & Kamakura, 2000; Ketchen & Shook, 1996). The contribution was threefold. First, the paper introduced culinary boundary crossing as a behaviour-based lens for studying tourist movement from familiar food choices to deeper local-food engagement. Second, it developed food-choice repertoire as a unit of analysis for regional food tourism. Third, it provided empirical evidence from Himachal Pradesh, a mountain tourism destination where cuisine was culturally rich but not always positioned as the primary tourism product. In doing so, the paper shifted attention from asking whether tourists liked local food to examining which parts of the local foodscape they actually entered.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Food tourism beyond general evaluation

Food tourism is closely tied to cultural encounter because local food allows tourists to consume place through taste, texture, aroma, preparation, and setting (Boniface, 2003; Long, 2004; Montanari, 2006; World Tourism Organization, 2012). Long (2004) treats culinary tourism as an exploration of otherness through food, while Boniface (2003) argues that food and drink tourism should be read through culture, context, and distinctiveness. Montanari (2006) similarly positions food as culture rather than simply as material consumption. These perspectives help shift food-tourism research away from a narrow service view of food. A second stream of work treats food tourists as heterogeneous markets rather than as a single type of traveller (Hjalager, 2004; Ignatov & Smith, 2006; Getz et al., 2014; Pérez-Priego et al., 2019). Hjalager (2004) proposed a sociological approach to gastronomy and tourism that recognizes different tourist orientations toward food. Ignatov and Smith (2006) segmented culinary tourists based on food- and wine-related activities, showing that culinary engagement varies across tourist groups. Pérez-Priego et al. (2019) similarly demonstrated that gastronomic tourists can be segmented by their interests and motivations. These studies justify the use of segmentation in food-tourism research.

Yet segmentation studies often focus on motivations, interests, or activity participation rather than dish-level tasting behaviour (Hjalager, 2004; Ignatov & Smith, 2006; Getz et al., 2014; Pérez-Priego et al., 2019). The present paper extends this discussion by using actual food items tasted as the basis of segmentation. This is important because tourists may express interest in local food but still consume only a narrow set of dishes. A dish-level approach therefore provides a more concrete view of how tourists engage with a regional cuisine.

Familiarity, otherness, and food boundaries

Food is a strong symbol of familiarity and difference because it is an object that is part of the world but enters the body as a part of the self (Fischler, 1988; Bell & Valentine, 1997; Montanari, 2006; Heldke, 2003). This is known as the omnivore's paradox (Fischler, 1988): Humans want diversity and they don't want to take risks with the unknown and the uncertain. This paradox is apparent in tourism when the tourist encounters the food item that is not known to them. Some visitors to regions of the world different from their own eat whatever they can, and some stick to what they know. The study of food neophobia provides a good understanding of this hesitation to eat unknown foods. Food neophobia is defined as reluctance to eat or avoidance of novel foods by Pliner and Hobden (1992). The present study does not quantify food neophobia as a psychological characteristic, however food neophobia can explain why some tourists may end up sticking to safer food choices. Recent tourism literature confirms that food neophobia acts as a primary barrier restricting tourists' variety-seeking behaviour, causing them to actively avoid unfamiliar regional ingredients (Sthapit, Björk, & Coudounaris, 2020; Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2020). This restricted variety-seeking can be an obstacle to exploring food in regional tourism contexts, either due to the unfamiliarity of ingredients, methods, names of dishes, or eating settings (Pliner & Hobden, 1992; Fischler, 1988; Long, 2004; Boniface, 2003).

While unfamiliar food can at times be a source of pleasure, distinction and adventure (Bourdieu 1984; Heldke 2003; Johnston & Baumann 2010; Gyimóthy & Mykletun 2009) it can also be a source of disgust. Bourdieu (1984) demonstrated that taste is a social product and can be a sign of distinction. Heldke (2003) studied the ethical and cultural dilemmas of consuming the "exotic"). Johnston and Baumann (2010) indicated that the modern food culture of the gourmet is a mix of democratic openness and distinction making. How unusual or "scary" food can be transformed into a tourist experience was demonstrated by Gyimóthy and Mykletun (2009). These views suggest a range of motivations for tourists to transgress culinary boundaries, from curiosity, status, thrill, to authenticity and greater cultural engagement.

Food-choice repertoire as a behavioural unit

A food-choice repertoire is the collection of foods that a tourist actually ate during his tour. The concept is good, as it can represent behaviour and attitudes. Market segmentation can be done based on observed behaviour, a basis that may be strong if the research objective is to understand actual consumption patterns (Wedel & Kamakura, 2000; Dolnicar, 2002; Ketchen & Shook, 1996; Everitt, Landau, Leese, & Stahl, 2011). While recent structural models successfully predict the intention to consume local food (Poyoi, Gassiot-Melian, & Coromina, 2022), they often leave a gap regarding the actual execution of those

intentions at the dish level. In terms of food tourism, utilizing a behavioural repertoire logic enables researchers to explore the question of not only whether food tourists are interested in local food products, but the tangible extent to which they interact with them. In the current study, there are two dimensions to repertoire. The first is culinary breadth, which is the amount of Himachali or regional foods tasted by a tourist. If a tourist samples one dish, his breadth is low, and if he samples ten or more, his breadth is high. The second is culinary boundary crossing – the depth or distinctiveness of the foods eaten. One tourist can sample a number of familiar foods without venturing far into the regional foodscape; another tourist can sample fewer but more culturally unique foods.

The difference between breadth and boundary crossing is of significance. The breadth of culinary experiences is reflected in culinary breadth. Border crossings presents a cultural and sensory experience of tasting food that is not so familiar, more local, or more difficult. The current study thus considers local food engagement as a repertoire development process instead of an assessment of one food item.

Himachal Pradesh as a layered mountain foodscape

Traditional foods of Himachal Pradesh are linked with geography, climate, agricultural produce, local knowledge, festival practices, fermentation, grains, pulses, dairy, meat, and regional serving traditions (Thakur et al., 2004; Savitri & Bhalla, 2007; Bessière, 1998; Montanari, 2006). Thakur et al. (2004) documented traditional fermented foods and beverages in Himachal Pradesh, while Savitri and Bhalla (2007) recorded traditional foods and beverages of the state. Their work shows that Himachali cuisine is not a single homogeneous food category but a varied regional food system. For tourists, this food system may appear in layers. The outer layer may include familiar or widely available foods such as momos and thukpa. A second layer may include iconic Himachali foods such as Dhaam, Madra, Siddu, Babru, and Mithha. A deeper layer may include region-specific vegetarian foods such as Tudkiya Bhaat, Bhey, Aktori, Patrode, Kaale Chane ka Khatta, Naiza Cake, and Sur. A further boundary may involve non-vegetarian or sensory-risk dishes such as Kullu Trout Fish, Chha Gosht, and Luchi Poti.

This layered structure gives the study its conceptual basis. The question is not simply whether tourists eat Himachali food, but where they enter the foodscape and how far they move. The following hypotheses are therefore proposed.

H1: Tourists can be classified into distinct dish-level food-choice repertoire segments based on their actual tasting of Himachali and regional foods.

H2: Culinary breadth differs significantly across the identified tourist food-choice segments.

H3: Culinary boundary crossing differs significantly across the identified tourist food-choice segments.

H4: Repeat visitors show higher culinary breadth and higher culinary boundary crossing than first-time visitors.

H5: Destination coverage positively predicts culinary breadth and culinary boundary crossing after controlling for demographic and travel variables.

H6: Tourist food-choice segment membership differs significantly by visitor profile variables, including visit frequency, visit purpose, region, travel companion, age, gender, and nationality.

H7: Destination coverage significantly predicts membership in higher-exposure food-choice segments relative to the minimal local-food segment.

Theoretical Framework

The paper is grounded in four theoretical ideas: food as incorporation, culinary otherness, taste as distinction, and post-hoc segmentation.

Food as incorporation and identity

The concept of incorporation (Fischler, 1988) is helpful as it helps to understand that food is not just seen, rather it is eaten and becomes part of the self. Thus food choice is more sensitive than other aspects of cultural consumption because food choice requires trust, body acceptance, sensory judgement and perceived safety (Rozin, 1990; Lupton, 1996; Fischler, 1988). Visitors can observe unfamiliar gestures, clothing, or behaviour safely but must also maneuver unfamiliar foodstuffs in terms of taste, cleanliness, ingredients, physical comfort and cultural significance (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Germov & Williams, 2008; Watson & Caldwell, 2005). This idea will, therefore, help to understand why some tourists are hesitant to venture into a regional cuisine, whereas others are more adventurous for more scrumptious and less known items.

The familiar and unfamiliar dishes in the present paper are explained by incorporation. Foods that are familiar to them decrease uncertainty. Deep local and sensory risk foods are more willing to "take in" something lesser known. So it is analytically sensible to have food choice at the dish level.

Otherness and adventure in the kitchen

The second theoretical foundation comes from culinary tourism, which is based on the concept of 'otherness' as explained by Long (2004). Food encountering difference is a tourist practice, but one that happens on a selective basis. It is not always preferable to be totally immersed in the unknown. For some tourists, there's a difference of a degree and for others there's a difference of a degree and more. The concept that strange foods can be explorations of the meal is reinforced by the study of "scary food" by Gyimóthy and Mykletun (2009). It is not the case that the present study suggests that the food of Himachali people is "scary" literally. Instead, it takes the more general concept that tourists have to transgress sensory, ingredient, dietary, or cultural barriers when consuming some foods.

Harmony of taste, distinction and culinary capital

What Bourdieu's (1984) theory of taste and distinction can tell us about the social significance of food choices is that it is possible for food selection to have social significance. Eating local or unusual cuisine may indicate openness and sophistication,

cultural curiosity, or distinction. This extends into the modern gourmet culture, that is the way in which 'authentic', 'exotic', 'locality' and 'distinction' influence people's discourse about and evaluation of food, as Johnston and Baumann (2010) argue. In this study, tourists who have sampled more and more varieties of Himachali foods are not considered as high class consumers. Rather, their behavior is viewed as another way to form a repertoire. They traverse more food boundaries, and more extensively interact with the mountain foodscape.

Post-hoc segmentation

The concept of post-hoc segmentation is the fourth theoretical base. Post-hoc segmentation is a segmentation that is conducted after the responses are observed and groups are created based on how the responses are distributed (Wedel & Kamakura, 2000; Dolnicar, 2002; Ketchen & Shook, 1996; Everitt et al., 2011). This is crucial because the present study does not assume the existence of predetermined concepts and categories, like 'adventurous tourists' or 'authenticity seekers'. It starts with real indicators on the level of the dish and then groups that have similar repertoires. The labels used for the segments are therefore descriptive. They are not "validated scales. They are labels given subsequent to the dominant food choice patterns observed in each cluster.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study adopted quantitative, cross sectional, post-hoc segmentation design. The design was suitable as the purpose was to discover food-choice repertoires and not to validate a psychometric scale. The analytical unit was the tourist, and the segmentation base were the set of dishes the tourist reported tasting. For segmentation analysis, there are two key aspects: statistical adequacy and substantive interpretable. (Wedel & Kamakura, 2000; Dolnicar, 2002; Ketchen & Shook, 1996; Everitt et al., 2011) Therefore, the study adopted a comparison approach to several cluster solutions instead of relying on a single cluster output from the automatic processes. Considering statistical fit, cluster size and interpretability at the same time. A primary survey dataset of cleaned data of 400 tourists who tasted the Himachali food during their visit was used in the study. The major tourist spots of Himachal such as Dharamshala, Manali, Shimla, Kullu and Mandi were covered during the survey. Those who did not taste Himachali food were excluded from the final analytical sample as the aim of this paper was to analyse dish level food exposure.

The data consisted of demographic information, travel information, indicators of destination visits and binary indicators for dish tasting. Thus, it was appropriate to investigate the links between tourist classifications and spatial mobility in the state and their relationship to food-choice repertoires. There were seventeen binary (yes/no) attributes related to tasting food that formed the segmentation base. The respondents were asked about each item, and coded as 1 if they had eaten it and 0 if they had not. Dishes included were Madra, Dhaam, Tudkiya Bhaat, Bhey, Babru, Aktori, Momos, Mithha, Kaale Chane ka Khatta, Kullu Trout Fish, Siddu, Chha Ghosht, Thukpa, Naiza Cake, Patrode, Sur and Luchi Poti.

Three constructed scores were used.

Culinary Breadth Score. This score was calculated as the total number of dishes tasted by each tourist. The possible range was 1 to 17.

Culinary Breadth Score = Sum of all seventeen binary dish indicators

Culinary Boundary-Crossing Score. This score was calculated by weighting dishes according to the level of culinary boundary crossing they represented. The weighting was used only as an analytical index, not as a validated scale.

Food category	Dishes included	Weight
Familiar or pan-Himalayan entry foods	Momos, Thukpa	1
Iconic Himachali foods	Dhaam, Siddu, Madra, Babru, Mithha	2
Deep-local vegetarian or regional foods	Tudkiya Bhaat, Bhey, Aktori, Kaale Chane ka Khatta, Naiza Cake, Patrode, Sur	3
Sensory-risk or non-vegetarian local foods	Kullu Trout Fish, Chha Gosht, Luchi Poti	4

Destination Coverage Score. This score counted the number of surveyed destinations visited by each respondent among Dharamshala, Manali, Shimla, Kullu, and Mandi. The possible range was 1 to 5.

The analysis proceeded in seven steps. First, the respondent profile and dish-level tasting frequencies were examined. Second, culinary breadth, boundary crossing, and destination coverage scores were computed. Third, six repertoire features were created for clustering: familiar food count, iconic food count, deep-local food count, sensory-risk food count, culinary breadth, and culinary boundary-crossing score. These features were standardized before clustering.

Fourth, K-means cluster solutions from two to six clusters were compared using silhouette coefficient, Calinski-Harabasz index, Davies-Bouldin index, cluster size, and substantive interpretability (Rousseeuw, 1987; Caliński & Harabasz, 1974; Davies & Bouldin, 1979; Kaufman & Rousseeuw, 1990). Fifth, chi-square tests and Cramer's V were used to examine whether dish choices and visitor profiles differed by segment (Cramér, 1946; Agresti, 2013). Sixth, Shapiro-Wilk tests showed non-normality for culinary breadth and boundary crossing; therefore, Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney U tests were used for group comparisons (Shapiro & Wilk, 1965; Kruskal & Wallis, 1952; Mann & Whitney, 1947). Seventh, OLS regression with robust

standard errors and multinomial logistic regression were used to test the predictive role of destination coverage and repeat visitation (White, 1980; Hosmer, Lemeshow, & Sturdivant, 2013).

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Sample profile

The final sample consisted of 400 tourists who had tasted Himachali food. The respondent profile was presented in Table 1. Male respondents formed 58.0% of the sample and female respondents 42.0%. Indian tourists accounted for 86.3%, while 13.8% belonged to other nationalities. First-time visitors accounted for 46.5%, while repeat visitors together accounted for 53.5%.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	232	58.0
	Female	168	42.0
Nationality	Indian	345	86.3
	Any other	55	13.8
Age	Less than 20 years	72	18.0
	20–40 years	131	32.8
	40–60 years	125	31.3
	Above 60 years	72	18.0
Visit frequency	First visit	186	46.5
	Second visit	113	28.3
	Third visit	46	11.5
	More than three visits	55	13.8
Visit purpose	Vacations	145	36.3
	Recreation	104	26.0
	Honeymoon	68	17.0
	Business	50	12.5
	Religious	33	8.3

Source: Author's computation based on primary data.

This profile was suitable for post-hoc segmentation because the sample contains variation in travel purpose, visit frequency, nationality, age, and visitor background. In tourism terms, Himachali food exposure could be examined across different visitor situations rather than among one narrow group of culinary tourists (Wedel & Kamakura, 2000; Dolnicar, 2002; Everitt et al., 2011).

Dish-level tasting profile

Table 2 presents the frequency distribution of the seventeen dish-level tasting indicators. The most commonly tasted dishes were Dhaam, Momos, Madra, Tudkiya Bhaat, Bhey, Patrode, Kaale Chane ka Khatta, and Siddu. The least tasted foods were Luchi Poti, Sur, Kullu Trout Fish, and Chha Ghosht. Such profiling is necessary before segmentation because cluster results depend on the distribution and discriminatory strength of input variables (Ketchen & Shook, 1996; Milligan & Cooper, 1985; Everitt et al., 2011).

Table 2. Dish-level tasting frequencies

Dish	n	%
Dhaam	106	26.5
Momos	105	26.3
Madra	95	23.8
Tudkiya Bhaat	89	22.3
Bhey	83	20.8
Patrode	82	20.5
Kaale Chane ka Khatta	81	20.3
Siddu	81	20.3
Babru	76	19.0
Mithha	76	19.0
Naiza Cake	70	17.5
Thukpa	66	16.5
Aktori	63	15.8
Chha Ghosht	62	15.5
Kullu Trout Fish	54	13.5
Sur	50	12.5
Luchi Poti	46	11.5

Source: Author's computation based on primary data
It meant that one group had more exposure to the culinary arts than the other. More popular or more available food is explored more, less popular or less accessible food is explored less. This suggested the lack of awareness and acceptance of less popular food items of the local population from the Himachal region.

Descriptive statistics of constructed scores
Descriptive statistics of the three scores constructed for the analysis are presented in table 3. The mean culinary breadth score was 3.21 (SD = 3.78), and ranged from 1 to 17. The mean score for boundary crossing was 8.10 (SD = 9.80) out of a possible range of 1 to 45. High standard deviations relative to means suggest that the food exposure is quite heterogeneous, and thus, segmentation is recommended (Wedel & Kamakura, 2000; Dolnicar, 2002).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for constructed scores

Score	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Culinary Breadth Score	3.21	3.78	1	17
Culinary Boundary-Crossing Score	8.10	9.80	1	45
Destination Coverage Score	1.70	1.31	1	5

Source: Author's computation based on primary data
This simply means that tourists don't interact with Himachali cuisine to the same extent. Some sample only a few known foods, and others venture into the regional foodscape much further.

Cluster-solution selection
To be included in the cluster analysis, 6 standardized variables of the repertoire were used: familiar food count, iconic food count, deep-local food count, sensory-risk food count, culinary breadth, and culinary boundary crossing score. There was a need to standardize the data because cluster analysis is sensitive to differences between measurement scales and variance in the data (Ketchen & Shook, 1996; Kaufman & Rousseeuw, 1990; Everitt et al., 2011). The two- to six-cluster solutions were compared based on the silhouette coefficient, Calinski-Harabasz index, Davies-Bouldin index, cluster size, and interpretability (Caliński & Harabasz, 1974; Davies & Bouldin, 1979; Rousseeuw, 1987; Milligan & Cooper, 1985).

Table 4. Comparison of cluster solutions

Number of clusters	Silhouette	Calinski-Harabasz	Davies-Bouldin	Cluster sizes
2	0.675	710.466	0.628	327, 73
3	0.546	540.356	1.034	57, 64, 279
4	0.489	441.279	1.020	50, 47, 47, 256
5	0.512	410.228	1.027	45, 243, 41, 50, 21
6	0.544	379.534	0.982	31, 43, 216, 50, 19, 41

Source: Author's computation based on primary data
The two cluster solution gave the best silhouette coefficient, however, it separated the respondents into just two general high and low exposure clusters. The four-cluster solution was chosen, as it showed satisfactory statistical adequate results and showed a better behavioural distinction. A cluster solution should be evaluated on the basis of fit, conceptual usefulness and interpretability (Ketchen & Shook, 1996; Dolnicar, 2002; Everitt et al., 2011). This finding was especially significant because the relationship between tourist involvement with food and the high versus low exposure dichotomy cannot be linear.

Tourist food-choice segments
The four-cluster solution generated four meaningful food-choice segments: Minimal Local-Food Tasters, Familiar Entry-Food Tasters, Iconic-Regional Repertoire Tasters and Boundary-Crossing Food Explorers. The labels were given based on the dominant repertoire pattern and are therefore to be interpreted as descriptor profiles and not as validated psychological concepts (Wedel & Kamakura, 2000; Dolnicar, 2002; Everitt et al., 2011).

Table 5. Tourist food-choice segments

Segment	n	%	Breadth Mean (SD)	Boundary Score Mean (SD)	Interpretation
Minimal Local-Food Tasters	256	64.0	1.23 (0.68)	3.38 (1.91)	Very narrow local-food exposure
Familiar Entry-Food Tasters	50	12.5	1.80 (1.16)	2.94 (2.88)	Low-depth repertoire centred on familiar entry foods
Iconic-Regional Repertoire Tasters	47	11.8	6.87 (1.76)	16.28 (4.34)	Moderate-to-wide tasting of iconic and selected regional foods
Boundary-Crossing Food Explorers	47	11.8	11.85 (1.77)	31.15 (4.66)	Wide repertoire across familiar, iconic, deep-local, and sensory-risk foods

Source: Author's computation based on primary data

The outcome indicated that the most common tourists stay at the peripheral layer of the Himachali foodscape, whereas the few join the inner layer. Therefore, there is tourism potential in the food of Himachali people, but most of the tourists are not availed all the components of the cuisine.

Segment validation through dish-level differences

All but four of the dish options were found to be significantly different between the four segments in a set of chi-square tests. The Cramer's V value for each experiment was between 0.509 and 0.798, which means that moderate to good differentiation existed. Because both the variables related to segment membership (segment), and the variables related to the tasting of the different dishes (dish) are categorical, Cramer's V is appropriate (Cramer, 1946; Agresti, 2013). The validation results are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Segment validation through dish-level chi-square tests

Validation criterion	Result
Number of dish-level indicators tested	17
Significant dish-level differences across segments	17 out of 17
Cramer's V range	0.509–0.798
Association strength	Moderate to strong
Hypothesis supported	H1

Source: Author's computation based on primary data

Many of these were found to have differences between the dishes, indicating that the clusters are not artificial. The segmentation was beneficial in terms of food interpretation, menu design and the development of culinary products within each segment and segment interaction due to the different food-choice signature.

Differences in culinary breadth across segments

The Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that culinary breadth was not normally distributed, $W = 0.646$, $p < .001$; therefore, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used (Shapiro & Wilk, 1965; Kruskal & Wallis, 1952; Field, 2018). The test showed a significant difference in culinary breadth across the four segments, $H(3) = 302.633$, $p < .001$. The effect size was large, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.757$, indicating substantial practical differentiation (Cohen, 1988; Tomczak & Tomczak, 2014). Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise Mann-Whitney tests showed significant differences between all segment pairs (Dunn, 1964).

Table 7. Kruskal-Wallis results for culinary breadth

Test variable	Shapiro-Wilk W	p	Kruskal-Wallis H	df	p	Effect size ε^2	Decision
Culinary Breadth Score	0.646	< .001	302.633	3	< .001	0.757	H2 supported

Source: Author's computation based on primary data

The result meant that tourists differ not only in preference but in the actual range of local foods they experience. For tourism planning, this suggested that some tourists needed basic awareness and access, while others were ready for advanced or curated food experiences.

Differences in culinary boundary crossing across segments

The Shapiro-Wilk test indicated non-normality for the boundary-crossing score, $W = 0.683$, $p < .001$. The Kruskal-Wallis test showed significant differences across segments, $H(3) = 235.257$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.587$ (Cohen, 1988; Tomczak & Tomczak, 2014). All pairwise differences were significant after Bonferroni adjustment.

Table 8. Kruskal-Wallis results for culinary boundary crossing

Test variable	Shapiro-Wilk W	p	Kruskal-Wallis H	df	p	Effect size ε^2	Decision
Culinary Boundary-Crossing Score	0.683	< .001	235.257	3	< .001	0.587	H3 supported

Source: Author's computation based on primary data

The result showed that tasting more dishes does not automatically mean deeper culinary engagement. The type of dishes tasted matters; therefore, tourism promotion should guide visitors from easy-entry foods toward more place-specific, ingredient-based, and culturally embedded dishes.

First-time and repeat visitor comparison

Mann-Whitney U tests were used because the dependent scores were non-normal (Mann & Whitney, 1947; Field, 2018). Repeat visitors reported higher culinary breadth than first-time visitors. First-time visitors had a mean breadth score of 2.07 (SD = 2.73), while repeat visitors had a mean of 4.21 (SD = 4.27), $U = 25{,}700.50$, $p < .001$, with a rank-biserial effect of 0.291. Repeat

visitors also had higher boundary-crossing scores. First-time visitors had a mean of 5.26 (SD = 7.14), compared with 10.57 (SD = 11.08) for repeat visitors, U = 25,725.00, p < .001, with a rank-biserial effect of 0.293. H4 is supported.

Table 9. First-time versus repeat visitors

Score	First-time visitors Mean (SD)	Repeat visitors Mean (SD)	Mann-Whitney U	p	Rank-biserial effect
Culinary Breadth Score	2.07 (2.73)	4.21 (4.27)	25,700.50	< .001	0.291
Culinary Boundary-Crossing Score	5.26 (7.14)	10.57 (11.08)	25,725.00	< .001	0.293

Source: Author's computation based on primary data

The result signified that repeat visitation can deepen culinary engagement. Returning tourists appear more familiar with local food settings and more willing to move beyond basic or familiar dishes.

Destination coverage and culinary repertoire

OLS regression with robust standard errors was used to test whether destination coverage predicted culinary breadth and boundary crossing after controlling for repeat visitation, age, gender, region, visit purpose, and travel companion. Robust standard errors were used because heteroskedasticity can affect standard error estimates in cross-sectional data (White, 1980; Wooldridge, 2010).

Table 10. Regression results for destination coverage and culinary repertoire

Dependent variable	Predictor	b	Robust SE	z	p	R^2
Culinary Breadth Score	Destination Coverage	2.026	0.156	12.964	< .001	0.642
Culinary Breadth Score	Repeat Visitor	0.517	0.235	2.198	.028	0.642
Culinary Boundary-Crossing Score	Destination Coverage	5.195	0.432	12.012	< .001	0.619
Culinary Boundary-Crossing Score	Repeat Visitor	1.074	0.639	1.682	.093	0.619

Source: Author's computation based on primary data

Note: Models controlled for gender, age, Indian region, visit purpose, and travel companion.

Destination coverage strongly predicted culinary breadth and culinary boundary crossing. Each additional destination visited increased the culinary breadth score by 2.026 dishes and the boundary-crossing score by 5.195 points. The result signified that culinary exploration is shaped not only by tourist willingness but also by itinerary structure. Tourists who moved across more destinations encountered more food settings, which made destination coverage a practical lever for expanding culinary engagement. H5 is supported.

Segment differences by visitor profile

Chi-square tests were used to examine whether segment membership differed by visitor profile variables (Agresti, 2013). Significant associations were found for visit frequency, visit purpose, Indian region, travel companion, age, and nationality. Gender was not significant at the 5% level.

Table 11. Chi-square tests for segment membership

Visitor profile variable	χ^2	df	p	Cramer's V	Interpretation
Visit frequency	127.478	9	< .001	0.326	Moderate association
Visit purpose	23.338	12	.025	0.139	Weak association
Indian region	36.756	15	.001	0.175	Weak association
Travel companion	31.519	9	< .001	0.162	Weak association
Age	33.137	9	< .001	0.166	Weak association
Gender	6.713	3	.082	0.130	Not significant
Nationality	16.771	3	.001	0.205	Weak-to-moderate association

Source: Author's computation based on primary data

The result signified that culinary behaviour is shaped by visitor context. Food repertoires varied with visit history, age, nationality, region, travel purpose, and companion type, while gender did not appear to be a major differentiating factor in this sample. H6 is partially supported.

Multinomial logistic regression

Multinomial logistic regression was used because segment membership had more than two unordered categories (Hosmer et al., 2013; Long & Freese, 2014). Minimal Local-Food Tasters were used as the reference category. The model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(30) = 263.013$, $p < .001$, with McFadden pseudo $R^2 = 0.314$. Pseudo R^2 values do not carry the same meaning as OLS R^2, but they provide useful comparative evidence of model fit (McFadden, 1974; Long & Freese, 2014).

Table 12. Multinomial logistic regression predicting segment membership

Comparison category versus Minimal Local-Food Tasters	Predictor	OR	95% CI	p
Familiar Entry-Food Tasters	Destination Coverage	1.776	1.159–2.722	.008
Iconic-Regional Repertoire Tasters	Destination Coverage	4.076	2.745–6.052	< .001
Boundary-Crossing Food Explorers	Destination Coverage	7.943	4.909–12.851	< .001
Familiar Entry-Food Tasters	Repeat Visitor	1.226	0.650–2.313	.528
Iconic-Regional Repertoire Tasters	Repeat Visitor	2.148	0.912–5.057	.080
Boundary-Crossing Food Explorers	Repeat Visitor	1.549	0.503–4.766	.446

Source: Author's computation based on primary data

Note: Model controlled forgender ,age ,and visit purpose.

Destination coverage significantly increased the odds of belonging to all higher-exposure segments. The result signified that higher food-exposure segments are strongly linked with how widely tourists move within Himachal Pradesh. This gave destination planners a clear intervention point: culinary boundary crossing could be encouraged through routes, trails, and itineraries that connected tourists with different regional food settings. H7 is supported.

Hypothesis testing summary

Table 13. Summary of hypotheses

Hypothesis	Relationship tested	Result
H1	Distinct dish-level food-choice segments exist	Supported
H2	Culinary breadth differs across segments	Supported
H3	Culinary boundary crossing differs across segments	Supported
H4	Repeat visitors show higher breadth and boundary crossing	Supported
H5	Destination coverage predicts breadth and boundary crossing	Supported
H6	Segment membership differs by visitor profile	Partially supported
H7	Destination coverage predicts higher-exposure segment membership	Supported

Source: Author's computation based on primary data

The results supported the culinary boundary-crossing framework. Tourists could be meaningfully segmented by actual dishes tasted, the segments differed in both breadth and depth of food exposure, and destination movement played a major role in explaining deeper culinary engagement. Overall, Himachali food tourism emerged as a layered behavioural process rather than a simple consume-or-not-consume activity.

DISCUSSION

The results indicated that tourists were not having any single homogeneous experience of food in the form of cuisine of the local people. They developed a repertoire of different dishes. Generally speaking, the sample of tourists sampled sampled a limited amount of local foodscape, with smaller groups sampling towards entry foods, iconic-regional foods and broader boundary-crossing foods. This discovery was helpful in establishing the main conclusion of the paper: regional food tourism should be considered not just in a general way, but in terms of actual food samples that can be tasted. The four segments exhibited various types of kinaesthetic expressions in food. There was very little exposure for Minimal Local-Food Tasters. Recognizable or low-risk foods (Familiar Entry-Food Tasters) were kept in close proximity. The iconic-Regional Repertoire Tasters came into the Himachali foodscape via the known and selected local food. In terms of moving furthest into the foodscape, Boundary-Crossing Food Explorers sampled a diverse array of iconic, deep local and sensory-risk foods. These differences indicated that the act of feeding in the context of tourism was a process of repertoire formation and not merely a feeding behaviour.

Results further revealed that destination coverage was a key component of culinary boundary crossing. A higher number of tourists visiting more locations in HP was significantly associated with an increase in the number of dishes eaten and an advancement in food categories. This implied that the spatial organisation of the journey influenced food exploration in addition to personal curiosity. This aligns with recent spatial tourism research confirming that intra-destination mobility increases serendipitous encounters with local culture (McKercher & Ho, 2021). The more of these points of contact, the more chances tourists have to sample local foods, vendors, restaurants, homestays, and regional practices for serving food. Repeat visitors were able to identify a wider culinary breadth and boundary crossing scores than the first-time visitors were able to identify. This signified that exposure could have lessened the hesitation and more the willingness to sample a broad spectrum of regional foods. When destination coverage was added to the multinomial model, however, repeat visitation was reduced in strength. This indicated that some of the importance of repeat visitation was that repeat visitors visited more locations and/or were aware of where local food is located.

The paper also expressed opinions on why the segment labels cannot be considered as constructs. They came from Dish level behaviour. They were of value for description rather than in the validation of measurements. The labels were used to interpret the distribution of tourists across the mountain foodscape, but were not a measurement of the level of food adventurousness and food involvement.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The first theoretical contribution was the development of culinary boundary crossing as a behaviour-based concept. The idea brings together food as incorporation, culinary otherness, food neophobia, and taste as social distinction. Fischler's (1988) notion of incorporation explains why eating unfamiliar food involves a stronger act of trust than merely observing cultural difference. Long's (2004) interpretation of culinary tourism as an encounter with otherness helps explain why local food can become a medium of cultural exploration. Pliner and Hobden's (1992) work on food neophobia clarifies why some tourists may remain with familiar foods, while Bourdieu's (1984) and Johnston and Baumann's (2010) work on taste and distinction helps explain why deeper or unusual food choices may carry symbolic meaning. The second contribution was the use of food-choice repertoire as a behavioural unit of analysis. Earlier food-tourism segmentation studies have shown that culinary tourists are heterogeneous, but many of them classify tourists by motivations, interests, or activities rather than by actual dish-level tasting behaviour (Hjalager, 2004; Ignatov & Smith, 2006; Getz et al., 2014; Pérez-Priego et al., 2019). This study extended segmentation logic by treating the repertoire of dishes tasted as the empirical base. The approach was consistent with post-hoc segmentation theory, which allows groups to emerge from observed response patterns rather than from pre-defined psychological constructs (Wedel & Kamakura, 2000; Dolnicar, 2002; Everitt et al., 2011).

The third contribution was the reframing of Himachal Pradesh as a layered mountain foodscape. Regional food scholarship shows that traditional food can function as heritage, rural identity, and place-based cultural capital (Bessière, 1998; Boniface, 2003; Montanari, 2006). Himachal Pradesh contains multiple layers of local food, from familiar entry foods to iconic dishes, deep-local vegetarian preparations, fermented or regional items, and sensory-risk foods (Thakur et al., 2004; Savitri & Bhalla, 2007). The present study showed that tourists do not enter these layers equally. This made the foodscape concept empirically measurable through dish-level exposure rather than only theoretically descriptive. The fourth contribution was methodological. The study demonstrated how cluster analysis can be used with binary dish-level data to generate interpretable tourist food-choice segments. The use of multiple cluster-validity criteria, non-parametric group comparison, chi-square association testing, robust regression, and multinomial logistic regression strengthened the empirical basis of the segmentation. This responds to methodological concerns in tourism segmentation research, where poorly justified cluster selection can weaken the credibility of segment labels (Dolnicar, 2002; Ketchen & Shook, 1996; Milligan & Cooper, 1985).

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings had implications for tourism planners, food entrepreneurs, destination marketers, restaurants, homestays, and community-based food providers in Himachal Pradesh. The large Minimal Local-Food Taster segment suggested that many tourists do not yet move deeply into Himachali cuisine. Food-tourism planning literature shows that local food becomes more useful for destination development when it is made visible, accessible, interpretable, and connected with place identity (Bessière, 1998; Boniface, 2003; World Tourism Organization, 2012; Getz et al., 2014). The results therefore pointed to a practical visibility gap rather than simply a demand gap. Familiar foods such as momos and thukpa can be used as entry points rather than dismissed as non-local distractions. Food neophobia research suggests that unfamiliar foods may discourage some consumers, especially when ingredients, preparation, or taste expectations are unclear (Pliner & Hobden, 1992; Fischler, 1988). A staged menu strategy can therefore guide tourists from familiar entry foods toward more regionally distinctive dishes such as Dhaam, Madra, Siddu, Babru, Mithha, Bhey, Patrode, and Kaale Chane ka Khatta. This staged approach is consistent with food-tourism development strategies that use interpretation, storytelling, and guided tasting to reduce uncertainty and increase engagement (Boniface, 2003; Getz et al., 2014; World Tourism Organization, 2012).

The Boundary-Crossing Food Explorer segment showed that a small but meaningful group of tourists is willing to taste deeper local foods. This group can be targeted through curated tasting menus, regional dish maps, homestay food experiences, boti-led explanations, festival-linked food events, and multi-destination culinary routes. Segmentation theory supports differentiated marketing because not all tourists require the same product design, information depth, or level of novelty (Wedel & Kamakura, 2000; Dolnicar, 2002; Ignatov & Smith, 2006). Himachal Pradesh can therefore avoid presenting local cuisine as a single generic product and instead design food experiences for different levels of culinary readiness. Destination coverage should be used strategically. Since tourists who visited more destinations tasted more and deeper foods, Himachal Pradesh could develop multi-destination culinary circuits. Each destination can highlight a small set of regionally distinctive foods instead of repeating the same limited menu everywhere. This was consistent with the view that local food can support regional identity, rural tourism, and heritage-based destination differentiation when it is linked to specific places and communities (Bessière, 1998; Boniface, 2003; Hjalager, 2004; World Tourism Organization, 2012).

Food interpretation was also essential. Many tourists may have hesitated because they did not understand ingredients, preparation, taste profile, or cultural setting. Short menu notes, QR-based dish stories, chef or boti narratives, food cards, and local-language-to-English dish explanations could help tourists cross culinary boundaries with greater confidence. Such interpretation was particularly important because culinary otherness could attract tourists but could also produce uncertainty when the food was unfamiliar (Long, 2004; Heldke, 2003; Gyimóthy & Mykletun, 2009). The practical objective was therefore to make deeper Himachali foods understandable without making them artificial or detached from their cultural setting.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study had limitations. First, it was based on cross-sectional survey data, so the results were interpreted as associations rather than causal effects. Second, the dish variables were binary. They captured whether a dish was tasted, but not quantity consumed, place of consumption, price, satisfaction, or frequency of consumption. Third, the culinary boundary-crossing score was a researcher-developed analytical index and not a validated psychometric scale. Fourth, the classification of foods into familiar, iconic, deep-local, and sensory-risk categories was context-specific. Future studies can refine this classification using expert panels, tourist interviews, or local culinary historians. Fifth, the segmentation results are based on one dataset

from Himachal Pradesh. Future studies can test whether similar repertoire segments appear in other mountain destinations or other Indian regional cuisines.

Future research may also develop a validated Culinary Boundary-Crossing Scale, but that would require a separate scale-development design involving item generation, expert validation, pilot testing, exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, and reliability and validity assessment. The present paper was therefore understood as a segmentation study, not a scale-development study.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined tourist engagement with Himachal Pradesh's mountain foodscape through dish-level tasting behaviour. Instead of following a satisfaction-loyalty pathway, the study used actual food-choice repertoires to identify how far tourists move through local cuisine. The analysis identified four food-choice segments: Minimal Local-Food Tasters, Familiar Entry-Food Tasters, Iconic-Regional Repertoire Tasters, and Boundary-Crossing Food Explorers. The results showed that most tourists tasted only a narrow part of the Himachali foodscape, while a smaller group crossed deeper culinary boundaries. Culinary breadth and culinary boundary crossing differed significantly across segments. Repeat visitors showed higher food exposure than first-time visitors, while destination coverage emerged as the strongest predictor of both breadth and higher-exposure segment membership.

The study contributed to food-tourism research by offering a behaviour-based way to analyse regional cuisine. It showed that local food should not be studied only as an experience, image, or loyalty driver. It can also be studied as a repertoire of actual dishes tasted by tourists. For Himachal Pradesh, the findings suggested that culinary tourism development should focus on guiding tourists from familiar entry foods toward deeper, more distinctive elements of Himachali food culture.

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