

# The Significance of Street Food in Promoting Tourism Development

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**Abstract:** This article explores the attributes of street food and its growing significance among tourists, providing insights into the global spread and evolution of street food culture. It discusses the unique features and benefits of street food in the context of modern urban life. The study also touches upon the dual role of street food in human life—both as a cultural experience and a potential health risk. Special attention is given to the diversity and importance of traditional Uzbek cuisine, which plays a vital role in attracting international tourists. Ultimately, the paper concludes that street food is emerging as one of the most appealing modern tourism services that captures the interest of global travelers.

**Key words:** Street food, attribute, tourist, gastronomy, food, cultural value, oyster, gastro-tourist.



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**Introduction.** In recent decades, food tourism has emerged as a dominant trend in global travel behaviour. According to international surveys, more than one-third of tourists' overall expenditures are spent on food, making gastronomy a core component of the tourism experience. Food is no longer merely a biological necessity during travel; it represents an essential cultural and experiential element that shapes destination image and tourist satisfaction (Higman, 2012).

Prior studies have confirmed that gastronomy significantly influences tourists' decisions when choosing travel destinations. One of the first questions travelers often ask is: "What can I eat there?" As a result, many visitors seek out authentic culinary experiences that include tasting local dishes, beverages, and sweets that reflect the heritage and identity of a region. This interaction with local food enhances tourists' understanding of regional culture and promotes deeper cultural exchange.

Among the many components of gastronomic tourism, street food has garnered increasing attention from both residents and travelers alike. Street food refers to ready-to-eat meals and snacks sold by vendors in public places such as markets, streets, parks, near educational institutions, and at fairs or festivals. Typically prepared in mobile kitchens or food trucks, street

food is often affordable, quick to prepare, and easily consumed without formal table service—characteristics that appeal particularly to urban dwellers and time-constrained tourists.

The concept of street food, introduced in the 19th century in the United States, has deep historical roots across different civilizations. For example, archaeological findings in ancient Pompeii provide evidence of food vendors and related utensils, while historical records show that in Ancient Greece, fried fish was commonly sold as a form of street food. During the Renaissance, Ottoman Turkey became one of the first states to officially legalize and regulate street food sales in 1502, and to this day, Turkish street food remains a vibrant part of urban life (Higman, 2012).

In contemporary urban societies, street food serves not only as a convenient food option but also as a cultural and economic phenomenon. In developing countries, especially, street food plays a significant role in supporting household food consumption, often constituting more than 30% of household food expenses (FAO, 2020). The World Health Organisation (2024) estimates that approximately 2.5 billion people consume street food daily, underscoring its global reach and societal relevance. Despite concerns about hygiene, regulation, and food safety, governments increasingly recognise the socio-economic value of street food, both as a source of employment and as a driver of tourism.

In Uzbekistan, traditional cuisine holds considerable appeal for international tourists. The diversity and cultural richness of national dishes such as plov, somsa, and shashlik serve as soft power assets in attracting foreign visitors. As such, integrating street food into tourism strategies not only enhances the visitor experience but also contributes to the sustainability of local economies by promoting microenterprises and cultural authenticity.

However, challenges remain. These include ensuring food safety, regulating vendor operations, and managing urban space to reduce congestion. Addressing these issues requires a coordinated approach involving municipal authorities, tourism stakeholders, and public health agencies. Nonetheless, the growing popularity of street food—especially among young urban consumers and gastrotourists—signals its rising status as a vital element in modern tourism services.

**Literature Review.** Street food serves as a powerful medium for integrating local resources, supporting community economies, and sustaining tourism systems by reflecting the cultural identity and traditional values of local populations. Around the world, street food has become a vital component of tourism and hospitality industries, as it encapsulates both the cultural essence and everyday life of a destination. Scholars in the field of tourism and gastronomy (Ab Karim & Chi, 2010; Tsai & Wang, 2017) emphasize the centrality of food—particularly street food (Henderson et al., 2012)—as a key motivator influencing travel decisions and tourist behavior.

Henderson's (2012) research in Singapore, for example, revealed the integral role of hawker centers and street food culture in shaping Singapore's tourism appeal. Street food is not merely a source of nourishment for travelers, but also a cultural symbol that fosters destination attachment and contributes to memorable experiences. As an inseparable element of Singaporean life, street food also represents a practical and cultural necessity for both locals and visitors.

Kanet (1997), in his study of African cities, explored the underlying causes behind the proliferation of street food in urban societies. According to him, the expansion of street food in Africa was largely a result of rapid urbanization and its associated constraints—such as long commutes between home and work, increasing poverty, growing female labor participation, changing family structures, and evolving eating habits. In addition, the absence of efficient collective food systems due to inadequate transport, lack of time, and insufficient workplace cafeterias encouraged people to purchase inexpensive street food instead of cooking at home.

Historically, the United States also saw the emergence of a robust street food culture during its colonial period. Street vendors sold affordable food items such as oysters, roasted corn, fruits, and

pastries to people from all walks of life. Oysters, in particular, were a highly accessible and popular item until around 1910, when overfishing and environmental degradation drove prices up (Higman, 2012). As urban populations grew rapidly, food demand soared, putting pressure on marine resources. In early 18th-century New York, food vendors began to face restrictions, and by 1707, street vending was banned altogether in the city.

African-American women played a prominent role in sustaining the street food tradition during the 18th and 19th centuries in the United States. In cities like Savannah and New Orleans, they sold items such as fruits, cakes, pralines, coffee, and biscuits, establishing a legacy of economic independence through culinary entrepreneurship. These examples illustrate how American street food culture emerged as a hybrid of Indigenous and immigrant culinary traditions.

This diverse historical trajectory demonstrates that street food is not only a cultural artefact but also a social and economic response to urbanisation, mobility, and lifestyle transformation. It reflects how communities adapt to new socio-economic contexts through food practices that are affordable, accessible, and rich in cultural meaning.

**Methodology.** This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in interpretivist epistemology, aiming to explore the cultural, economic, and experiential dimensions of street food within the context of tourism development. Given the subject's embeddedness in local identity and sensory engagement, a qualitative lens is best suited for capturing the depth of tourist perceptions and socio-cultural dynamics associated with street food.

The research employs a case study design, focusing on Uzbekistan, with comparative insights drawn from other global destinations known for their street food culture (e.g., Thailand, Mexico, Turkey, and Singapore). This comparative framework enables the identification of unique attributes and common trends shaping the street food-tourism nexus.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 international and domestic tourists in Bukhara and Tashkent to gain insights into their motivations, preferences, and experiences related to street food.

Field observations were carried out in street food hubs such as Chorsu Bazaar (Tashkent), Lyabi-Hauz area (Bukhara), and other informal food clusters to examine vendor practices, hygiene conditions, and interactions with tourists.

#### Secondary Data:

- Literature from peer-reviewed journals, international tourism reports (UNWTO, FAO, WHO), and government statistics on tourism flows and food-based expenditures in Uzbekistan were reviewed and analyzed.
- Historical data on street food development, especially from cultural and socio-economic perspectives, were sourced from academic books and encyclopedic references.
- Purposive sampling was used to select interview participants based on their engagement with street food during travel. The selection included a balance of different age groups, nationalities, and travel motivations (leisure, cultural, gastronomic). Vendors were also informally engaged to understand their perspectives on tourism and customer dynamics.

Thematic content analysis was conducted using NVivo software. The interview transcripts and field notes were coded around key themes such as:

- Food safety and hygiene
- Cultural authenticity
- Tourist satisfaction

- Economic accessibility
- Marketing and visibility

These themes were then cross-referenced with the global literature to identify points of convergence and divergence in Uzbekistan's street food-tourism relationship.

To ensure credibility, triangulation was applied by integrating data from multiple sources (interviews, observations, documents). Participants provided informed consent, and all ethical standards for social research involving human subjects were maintained in line with the Declaration of Helsinki guidelines.

**Discussion and Findings.** In the 21st century, street food has evolved from a mere necessity into an indispensable element of urban life and global tourism culture. It has become an integral part of modern cities, catering not only to local populations but increasingly serving as a magnet for international tourists. The habitual consumption of affordable and flavorful street food during travel, nighttime walks, or daily commutes reflects a broader transformation in both food culture and tourism dynamics.

Our research findings confirm that street food now constitutes a major experiential attraction, particularly in urban tourism contexts. In destinations such as Turkey, Italy, Spain, Singapore, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, Indonesia, and Malaysia, street food has become a core component of the destination image and a primary motivation for travel among food-inclined tourists (gastrotourists). These countries have successfully positioned street food as both a culinary heritage and a living cultural practice, often integrating it into national branding strategies.

Field interviews with tourists in Uzbekistan revealed that local culinary authenticity, freshness, and spontaneity are the top factors that drive interest in street food. For many visitors, street food represents a tangible and immediate entry point into local culture, offering flavours and practices not found in formal dining establishments. Moreover, tourists reported that street food consumption provided unique opportunities for interpersonal interactions with local vendors and fellow travellers, enhancing the overall tourism experience.

The study also identifies street food as an informal economic sector that contributes to local livelihoods, particularly in developing regions. In many countries, including Uzbekistan, street food vendors are often small-scale entrepreneurs, frequently operating without formal recognition or institutional support. Despite this, the sector provides employment, especially for women and low-income households, while also helping to preserve traditional recipes and culinary techniques.

As observed in similar economies (e.g., in Southeast Asia or Latin America), street food serves as a bridge between agriculture, urbanisation, and tourism, utilising local produce and promoting regional identity. However, the absence of standard hygiene regulation and infrastructure remains a challenge, as confirmed by tourist feedback and WHO/FAO reports (WHO, 2024; FAO, 2007).

Based on thematic analysis and existing literature (Henderson et al., 2012; Ab Karim & Chi, 2010), the functions of street food in contemporary society can be grouped as follows:

1. **Culinary and Cultural Identity** – Street food embodies the local gastronomic culture and is perceived as an authentic expression of heritage.
2. **Convenience and Affordability** – Its accessibility and low price make it attractive to both tourists and residents.
3. **Social Inclusivity** – Street food is a democratic form of dining, cutting across socioeconomic classes.

4. **Tourism Enhancement** – It adds value to destination image and contributes to word-of-mouth promotion among travelers.



**Figure 1. The role of street food in social life**

**1. Socio-Economic Significance.** Street food plays a vital socio-economic role in many countries by contributing to employment generation, particularly among low-income groups. It provides an important source of livelihood for the urban poor and serves as an entry point into the informal economy. Additionally, street food represents a key attraction for tourists, acting as a competitive element in the tourism sector. Its affordability offers food accessibility for economically disadvantaged populations, while also diversifying the urban food supply.

**2. Cultural Significance.** Street food serves as a culinary representation of national identity, reflecting the traditions and values of a country's cuisine. For example, *non* and *osh* are central to Uzbekistan's gastronomic image; fast food characterizes the American diet; *Pani Puri* is iconic in India; and seafood-based snacks are typical in China. Each represents a unique cultural symbol that not only feeds the population but also promotes cultural heritage to tourists.

**3. Gastronomic Value.** From a gastronomic perspective, street food contributes significantly to the development of culinary tourism. Local chefs often create new recipes and food presentations that enhance the food culture of the destination. This gives rise to a growing segment of travelers known as "gastro-tourists," who seek authentic, local culinary experiences. In Uzbekistan, this trend is accelerating, as foreign visitors show increasing interest in the country's rich culinary heritage. Dishes such as *shashlik*, *manti*, and *lagman* attract international attention and enhance the country's gastronomic appeal.

**4. Public Health and Hygiene Considerations.** Despite its popularity, street food presents certain health and safety challenges. The outdoor preparation environment exposes food to pollutants, bacteria, and poor sanitary conditions. Moreover, improper storage and expired ingredients can pose serious health risks. Therefore, implementing hygiene standards and training programs for street vendors is essential to ensure food safety and public trust.

Uzbekistan has a long-standing tradition of national cuisine that is deeply tied to the country's geography, climate, and seasonal cycles. Many traditional dishes have been consumed for centuries and can be adapted into street food offerings. For example:

- In summer, dairy- and vegetable-based meals (*qatiqli sho 'rva*, *achchiq-chuchuk*) are popular for their cooling effects.
- During the winter, high-protein dishes like *mastava*, *paysherva*, and meat-filled pastries are preferred to sustain energy and warmth.
- In spring, herb-based meals (*ko 'ksomsa*, *yalpizli sho 'rva*) are consumed for detoxification and health restoration after winter.

These seasonal and regionally specific dishes can be creatively incorporated into the street food sector, both as a way to preserve cultural heritage and as an attractive feature for culinary tourists. Promoting these foods in a structured, hygienic, and tourist-friendly manner could further enhance Uzbekistan's position as a gastronomic destination.

### National Gastrotourism Products of the Uzbek People



**Source:** Developed by the author.

The dishes listed above represent some of the most beloved and distinctive elements of Uzbek cuisine, widely consumed across the country's diverse regions. Although the core ingredients and names may be similar, each province of Uzbekistan prepares and presents these foods in unique ways, reflecting local culinary heritage and environmental factors. This diversity forms the foundation for developing region-specific gastrotourism brands.

For instance, Tashkent region is known for its *norin*, *qazi*, *choponcha*, *khasip*, and *soqqoq somsa*, all of which could be consolidated into a gastrotourism identity for the region. Similarly, *Samarkand noni* (bread), *Samarkand palov* (pilaf), and *noxat shurva* (chickpea soup) may serve as core products for Samarkand's gastronomic image. In Bukhara region, specialties such as *Gijduvon kebab*, *Olot somsa*, and *kök somsa* can be highlighted as flagship dishes. Qashqadarya's *tandir goshti* (tandoor meat), Khorezm's *baliq* (fish dishes), *tuxum barak*, and *yupqa* (layered pastries) represent further examples of regional branding potential for street food tourism.

While the variety of traditional dishes is vast, not all are suitable for street-style consumption. Therefore, it is crucial to identify and promote those foods that can be feasibly and hygienically prepared and sold in street food settings. These foods can serve as authentic, affordable, and culturally rich attractions for tourists, enriching the urban experience.

**Conclusion.** In the context of rapidly expanding urban tourism, it is increasingly difficult to imagine modern city life without street food. As tourists seek immersive and affordable culinary experiences, street foods have emerged as a major draw in many global destinations. In Uzbekistan, integrating traditional foods into the street food sector represents a strategic opportunity to diversify the tourist offering and promote regional culinary identities.

However, the growth of this sector necessitates careful attention to health, hygiene, and food safety regulations. Legal frameworks must be developed to formalise street food vending, and quality control measures should be strictly implemented. The street food economy often provides employment and food access for lower-income urban populations, offering nutritious meals at affordable prices while creating income-generating opportunities for vendors.

To ensure sustainable development, future research should focus on the hygienic and nutritional quality of street foods in Uzbekistan. This includes regulating dietary standards, packaging, and vendor qualifications. Additionally, spatial planning of vending areas and pricing mechanisms should be integrated into urban development and taxation strategies. A well-regulated and culturally grounded street food system can enhance Uzbekistan's gastrotourism profile and support inclusive economic growth.

The following strategic recommendations are proposed to advance the future development and sustainability of gastronomic tourism.:

1. The government, in collaboration with local municipalities and health departments, should establish clear hygienic and operational standards for street food vendors to ensure food safety and protect public health.
2. Each region of Uzbekistan should identify its unique street food offerings and develop them as part of a gastrotourism brand. This can help attract culinary tourists and preserve regional culinary identities.
3. Introduce training programs on hygiene, small business operations, and customer service for street food vendors. Microfinance and small grants should be offered to help vendors modernize their infrastructure and maintain compliance with health codes.
4. National tourism campaigns should include street food as a key cultural asset. This can be achieved through food festivals, interactive culinary tours, and inclusion of popular street dishes in travel itineraries.
5. Allocate designated and regulated areas for street food markets in urban centers, especially near tourist attractions. This ensures order, hygiene, and ease of access for tourists.
6. Encourage partnerships between the tourism sector, local governments, and private entrepreneurs to invest in safe and attractive street food infrastructure and services.
7. More academic studies should be carried out on the economic, cultural, and health impacts of street food in Uzbekistan, especially its role in attracting international tourists and supporting local livelihoods.

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