

## **Exploring Sensory and Cultural Experiences of Tourists with Local Gastronomy Case of Amritsar, Punjab, (India)**

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### **Abstract**

Eating is a basic need for all but it also differentiates us when it comes to gastronomic tourism. Tourists when exploring local food of a destination, try to experience its sensory elements and explore the gastronomic culture of a region. The food experience of the tourists must be different from their regular daily environment. Research about the sensory elements, cultural experiences of tourists with local food was carried out in Amritsar (also called as the food capital of Punjab) a region, known for its famous food specialities and Golden Temple, the most visited religious place in the World. The aim of this paper is to explore the sensory and cultural experiences of the tourists who visited famous local food outlets in the city which in turn will help tourism stakeholders to promote Amritsar as a gastronomic destination by marketing its authentic and sumptuous gastronomic delights.

**Keywords:** gastronomy, local food, culture, sensory elements

### **Introduction:**

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines gastronomic tourism as an activity connected with tourist's food related experiences during travel. Gastronomic tourism is a linkage between the destination and tourists which further allows to explore the culture, and culinary offerings of a place. With increasing global competition between tourist destinations, the search for peculiar experiences becomes more intense (UNWTO, 2017). The economy of the world in the twenty-first century is becoming complex, global and multi-dimensional. Pine and Gilmore (1998) are of the view that in the fastest growing experience economy, consumers are looking for unique, memorable and sensation filled long lasting experiences. Study by Chandralal and Valenzuela's (2013) indicates that experiencing local culture and food at a destination makes travelling more memorable.

Tourism experiences tasted by the visitors include the local gastronomic delights, culture of a destination and variety of techniques and ingredients used in local food. The destination identity and its differentiating quality always remain as the foundation for developing gastronomic tourism in a region (UNWTO & Basque culinary centre report, 2019). The present study is meant to explore the sensory and cultural experiences of the tourists with local gastronomy of Amritsar city in Punjab

(India) during their visit and also to provide an insight about the gastronomic experiences of the tourists along with suggestive measures to enhance the image of Amritsar city as a gastronomic destination. The study presents an insight view of the tourists about their gastronomic and cultural experiences in the city of Amritsar also known as the food capital of Punjab (India). The paper is organized as follows. First, the author presents a literature review and defines the key concepts. This review is followed by a discussion of the research methods adopted in the study. The findings, which are presented in results, are discussed. Finally, the conclusions, managerial implications, study limitations, and suggestions for future research are presented.

## **Literature review**

Gastronomy tourism is on the rise today, not only because food is central to any tourist experience, but also because the concept of gastronomy has evolved to encompass culture of a place, values of the territory, local history and cultural heritage (UNWTO, 2017). Visitors are involved in some mode of dining during travel (Chang, Kivela, and Mak, 2011) right from relishing food which is familiar to seeking unique cuisines or local dishes (Cohen and Avieli, 2004). Considering food as an integral part of travel, the tourists anticipate unique and delightful gastronomic experiences regardless of whether these are or are not the main motive of travel (Kivela and Crotts, 2006).

### **Local food**

Tourist destinations have developed their local food as a tourism product for attracting tourists and offering them abundant culinary options which differentiate them from others (Robinson & Getz, 2014; Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2010). Local food of a place not only satisfies the physiological need but also paves the way to know and understand different cultures, traditions and interactions with the local population (Okumuş and Cetin, 2018). The local food of a destination cannot be exactly replicated and hence it ensures a differentiation tool which can be used for destination marketing (Henderson, 2009).

### **Sensory appeal of the local food**

Sensory appeal is one of the important aspects among motivational factors for local food consumption by the tourists as stated by Kim & Scarles (2009). The symbolic dimension of tourists' food motivation discussed by Mak, Lumbers, & Eves, 2012 describes that learning local culture, exciting experience, authenticity of the local gastronomy remains a physical motivation for the tourists. The tourists look for the authentic taste, local flavours of the ingredients and authenticity of the place wherein all of these are a part of the sensory issues perceived by the five senses and also considered as the physical motivators (Fields, 2002). The taste, visual effect and smell of the local food reflects the sensory appeal which further creates motivation for the tourists Kim et al. (2009). Experiencing local food at a destination also leads to understanding the living style, behaviour, eating habits and other related cues (Getz, 2000).

Local food may belong to a place, region or state e.g. local foods of Amritsar, Gujarat or Tamil Nadu in India. Another view about local food is that it is consumed locally and the recipes for making these local delicacies have been passed on to generations for a long time. Although some of the foods are not been documented well but there add on health benefits and association with history has a

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significant role to play (European Commission, 2007). Countries are offering their local specialities which distinguish them from others and it becomes the identity of the place for the tourists, for example rice is staple food in countries like Japan and most Asian destinations (Takahashi and Honma, 2009). Local food plays a leading role in impressing tourists who visit the destination (Skinner P 2000; Van Westering J.Y Poria and N.Liapis 2000). Culinary-gastronomic tourism – a search for local food experiences, a study done by Peter Björk and Hannele Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2014 says that the tourists perceive local food to be fresh, delicious and more authentic.

### **Gastronomy and culture**

O'Mahony (2001) asserts that the food of a place becomes an opportunity for visitors to learn another culture and involve themselves with a cuisine which is different from their own culture and place. Hjalager and Richards (2002) states in their study that local food is an essential part of the tourism experience since it can serve both as a cultural and an entertaining activity.

Food is known to be the gateway for understanding culture of a place. Besides the aspect of the tourist's motivation to escape ordinary life, food and food habits is a good way for tourists to understand and get to know each other and a different culture (Cohen, 1988; Bell and Valentine, 1997; Hegarty and O'Mahoney, 2001; Henderson, 2009). Bessiere, 1998; recognises food as a medium of interpreting identity and culture of a place and has also become an important dimension of cultural tourism.

Food and culture are two inseparable components of tourism. According to a study done by Atkins and Bowler, 2001, the food culture of a place defines the behavior towards acceptable and unacceptable foods in a particular society or a social group. Boniface, 2003 states that food of a place distinguishes one culture from another and the example quoted by Warde, 1997 describes it by saying that eating habits of people in the west differs from the people in the east. Kim *et al.* (2009) claim that food becomes important in choosing a destination, because of “the desire to travel and taste unique and authentic dishes”. Local food is seen as a manner to learn about the other culture and this creates a new niche within tourism which is called food tourism or culinary tourism (Smith and Xiao, 2008).

### **Methodology**

The current study was conducted using a qualitative approach. It aimed to explore the experiences of tourists with sensory aspects of local food and culture of Amritsar with the help of grounded theory approach.

The target population was tourists consuming local food at famous eating joints. . Data was collected using the authors' personal networks (convenience sampling). The key advantage of this sampling technique is that it is relatively cost effective, efficient and easy to implement, while it is difficult to generalise the findings to the target population (Link, 2017). Researcher along with the team carried out data collection with a survey questionnaire from 24 people visiting various famous eateries of Amritsar serving local Punjabi food.

The research done in the study adopted a grounded theory research design (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyse the collected data. A grounded theory approach is defined as a qualitative research method

that uses a systematic set of processes to develop an inductively derived theory about a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

With the help of local tour operators and hotels in Amritsar, invitations were sent to 50 respondents in December, 2020 requesting their participation for a pilot interview. The sample included tourists who had visited Amritsar in the last three years and experienced local food and culture while in Amritsar and also stayed there for more than two days.

The pilot interviews lasted 10–15 min and the purpose was to know the local food outlets and places of cultural importance they visited during their stay which further led to the creation of a final phase of data collection. The data collection comprised of standardised, open-ended questions having three sections. Section one of the questionnaire contained demographic information about the tourists (age, gender, marital status, and nationality). Second section of the questionnaire included questions about food preferences during travel (e.g. ‘do you generally prefer eating local food and cuisine?’) Tourists were asked about their local food experience in terms of taste, flavour and other sensory attributes of food, their motivations for local food and their overall experience. In section third the respondents were asked to comment on their local cultural tour of the place and interaction with the locals (e.g. Visit to Golden Temple, Jallianwala Bagh and other famous places related to cultural significance). Respondents were asked further about their motivations to visit Amritsar (e.g. what motivated you to visit Amritsar?).

All interviews were conducted in English, Hindi and Punjabi (local language) between January 2021 and February 2021 and they lasted 10–30 min. With 24 participants theoretical saturation was achieved, as fresh data provided no additional meaningful/valuable insights that could further enhance the understanding of sensory and cultural experiences. Analysis of data was done using three steps for a grounded theory approach cited by Strauss and Corbin (1990) wherein the first step for data analysis included the scanning of data, second step was to read the interviews and list out the categories of sensory and cultural experiences. The third and the last step were to assign coding using MAXQDA 10 qualitative data analysing software. Three types of coding were employed: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The table 1&2 illustrates the coding process adopted for the study.

The views of the tourists extracted from the transcripts of the study along with the initial codes extracted from the raw data through line by line coding are displayed in the Table 1.

Relevant information was extracted through the interviews with the tourists that further specify the main theme of the study.

**Table: 1. Open coding (line-by-line coding) an example.**

Tourists views (extracted from transcripts)	Open coding (line-by-line coding)
We loved the taste of Tandoori chicken, I prefer Amritasri fried fish as its prepared differently as in my home place, Lassi was my favourite, Kulchas wer really delicious, I preferred to eat street food as it gave me	Taste, aroma, flavour, method of cooking, authenticity, local food, culture of a place

chance to know the culture, Flavour of mutton tikka was really amazing, I prefer kulcha over naan because it had a different taste and strange to me, id didn't liked samosas it was too spicy, i will never forget the aroma of Punjabi thali, Roomali roti with chicken stuffing was an authentic method of cooking, tasting local food gave chance to interact with locals, Eating Punjabi thali was a new experience for me to know the traditional culture, participating in Amritsar morning food trail was really exciting to know the local culture especially with local tourist guide ( Justin, male, American)

*Source:* Developed for the study

**Table: 2. Coding process in practice (An example)**

Open coding (line-by-line coding)	Subthemes (axial coding)	Main themes (selective coding)
<b>Culture of a place, authentic experience, local food, method of cooking, taste, flavour, aroma</b>	Sensory appeal, local culture	Sensory appeal of the food and culture of a place adds to the unique experience of tourists

The researchers identified 74 initial codes that summarized the data. Axial coding further reduced the data into small subthemes which were found to be relevant to the study. It was through the axial coding that the researcher was able to identify the main theme of the sensory and cultural experiences related with the local food. The Table 2 shows the main themes identified which are categorised as:

**Local culture**

**Authenticity**

**Local food**

**Method of cooking**

**Sensory appeal (taste, flavour, aroma).**

As described in Table 2. all categories of sensory and cultural experiences were derived from open and axial coding and then detailed main theme has been presented through selective coding process.

## Results and discussion

Table 3 shows the demographic profile of the respondents where it was found that males were more in number than the females (14M, 10F). Age of the respondents varied from 27-59 and most of the respondents were married (21), The respondents belonged to domestic outside Punjab (16) and International (8) categories. Majority of the respondents were travelling with family (18). The main motivation for travelling to Amritsar was visiting Golden Temple and exploring local culture and food. Though visiting Golden Temple was the first motive but since the researcher wanted to study the tourists who were experiencing local gastronomy, therefore data was collected from respondents who were experiencing local food and culture.

**Table: 3. Profile of the respondents:**

	Name of the respondents	Gender	Age	Marital status	Occupation	Nationality
1	<b>Rajinder</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Service</b>	<b>Maharashtra(India)</b>
2	<b>Navpreet</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>School teacher</b>	<b>Agra(India)</b>
3	<b>Sudhanshu</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Business</b>	<b>Guwahati(India)</b>
4	<b>Mahima</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Travel expert</b>	<b>Jhansi(India)</b>
5	<b>Devinder</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Ludhiana(India)</b>
6	<b>Justin</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Business</b>	<b>America</b>
7	<b>Maria bose</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>Single</b>	<b>Food writer</b>	<b>Malaysia</b>
8	<b>Steve</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>Single</b>	<b>Service</b>	<b>Australia</b>
9	<b>Gianna</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Accountant</b>	<b>London</b>
10	<b>Sofia</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>Single</b>	<b>Doctor</b>	<b>Malaysia</b>
11	<b>Rico smith</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Teacher</b>	<b>America</b>
12	<b>Victor</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Business</b>	<b>Thailand</b>
13	<b>Shane</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Business</b>	<b>America</b>
14	<b>Yukta</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Kolkata(India)</b>
15	<b>Govind</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Photographer</b>	<b>Maharashtra(India)</b>
16	<b>Arjun</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Sales person</b>	<b>Gwalior (India)</b>
17	<b>Diksha</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Computer operator</b>	<b>Gujarat(India)</b>
18	<b>Shilpa</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Research scholar</b>	<b>Maharashtra(India)</b>
19	<b>Seema</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Beautician</b>	<b>Jaipur(India)</b>
20	<b>Yuvraj</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Service</b>	<b>Lucknow(India)</b>
21	<b>Gorakh</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Technical expert</b>	<b>Chennai(India)</b>
22	<b>Yadvinder</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Business</b>	<b>Bilaspur(India)</b>
23	<b>Jasbir</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Restaurateur</b>	<b>Chandigarh(India)</b>
24	<b>Hanuman</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Business</b>	<b>Udaipur(India)</b>

**Source:** Developed from data collection

### **Sensory experience related to Local gastronomy:**

Most of the tourists (18) wanted to experience the local cuisine and were found to be more curious about the food which was new to them. The flavour and aroma along with taste of the local food (part of sensory pleasure) delighted their experience by fulfilling their quest for something authentic in Amritsar which is in similar pattern to several studies undertaken in context of local food motivations Kivela and Crotts, 2006, Fields, 2002 & Kim et al., 2009., Response from *an American tourist Justin*, stated that ***“I prefer kulcha over naan because it had a different taste and strange to me, flavour of mutton tikka was really amazing”*** supports the findings related to experiencing local cuisine which describes that tasting new or novel cuisine at a destination enriches the experience of the tourists especially the (Neophiliacs), who believe in exploring new foods associated with a different taste, authenticity, and different methods of cooking (Fischler, 1988).

Another response towards sensory appeal was from *Jasbir (Chandigarh) a tourists who tried Amritsari Cholle (Gram curry)* ***“ I have never tasted this before, the flavour and blend of spices really surprised me as i have heard about this before but never knew it will be so different as prepared in Chandigarh”*** which supports the study of Mak et al., 2012, asserting that the food experience of tourists occur in a foreign environment and are often in contrast with everyday eating and the novel or authentic experience with the food makes it memorable for a tourist. Apart from enjoyable experience with local food another response from *Yukta, a female tourist from Kolkata suggests the fear and anxiety of tourists in exploring local food as she remarked over eating Amritsari cholle*, that ***“ the gravy is too spicy and i prefer eating my meal at hotel i am staying rather going in for local food”*** which supports the neophobic attitude of tourists who do not want to explore something new and always prefer eating their regular meals and also been studied by various researchers like Fischler, 1988 & Torres,2002 who cites that tourists generally prefer eating conventional foods which they are used to consume daily and oppose trying novel cuisine.

### **Cultural experience related to Local gastronomy:**

Culture can be better experienced through local food and experience of local food is also the gateway to new cultures (Long, 1998, 2004). Many interviews expressed interaction with locals and cultural importance in tourists experience with local food. This has been reflected in responses of tourists as one of the tourists *Gianna from London said* ***“ I was accompanied by my friend and when we were coming out from Golden temple after paying our obeisance, we came across a family who guided us to many local famous food outlets and the hospitality they extended was amazingly superb”***. Another tourist *Yuvraj from Lucknow responded to the culture of Amritsar by saying that* ***“I came from Lucknow, a place known for its food and courtesy but my experience at Makhan fish corner was amazing as I got to know that Amritsari people are very fond of eating outside everyday and fish remains their favourite during winters”***. *Govind, a tourist from Maharashtra who experienced local food at Sadda Pind outlet said that*  ***I have never visited such place which informs me so much about local culture, food is authentic and mingles with the local culture, especially the cooking of Saag and Makki di roti in earthen vessels, live cooking method displaying the local culture of Amritsar and after interacting with people in the outlet I was***

*informed that Amritsar local food outlets are famous for their unique, authentic specialities which are not found elsewhere*". The above response supports the relevant studies on cultural influence on tourist's local food consumption done by Goodenough, 1971 & Atkins & Bowler, 2001; Logue, 1991 wherein it has been noticed that it is the culture, behaviour and attitude of locals which acts as a major determinant for tourists to experience local cuisine. Further, Prescott et al., 2002, mentions that the culture of a place decides about the acceptability and undesirability of food as per its sensory properties.

### **Conclusion and implications:**

Although the findings are not generalized to all potential tourists in a destination, this study represents an initial underpinning, and it has developed an understanding of what contributes to tourists' sensory and cultural experiences with local gastronomy of Amritsar.

The key components of the study reveal that the tourists enjoy the local culture of a place accessed through local gastronomy by the way of tasting and experiencing local food which supports the proposed definition of gastronomic tourism mentioned in the **Global report on Food Tourism by UNWTO (2012)** that states it as an experiential journey of the tourists to experiment, understand the culinary attributes of a region and learning from different cultures. Tourists when experiencing local cuisine look for authenticity and a novel experience, the results of the study indicates and supports the past research on food experiences where the local food is generally equated with authenticity pertaining to offering something unique and in contrast to everyday eating to the tourists (Mak et al., 2012). The study also demonstrates that the local food and its sensory appeal leaves an impression about revisiting the place again and also an urge to explore many other varieties of the region which remains unexplored during the visit. The study suggests that the food outlets must encourage use of authentic ingredients and more live cooking methods to make tourists visit more memorable and satisfying. Social interaction between the tourists and the service providers must be worked out carefully to better understand the need and wants of the guests. Since the study is destination specific, so there are limitations to generalise the results as the data was collected from the tourists visiting only Amritsar. Research in other tourist's destinations with a larger sample would increase the generalizability of the findings.

Further a framework specific study can be conducted out of the sensory and cultural components of the tourists experiences making it more generalised. Since the study focussed on sensory and cultural experiences, further there is immense scope to conduct research in other dimensions of experience like exploring memorable experiences of the tourists in context to their expectations and perceptions about local food and their revisit intentions to the destination.

The outlet managers must devise strategies to enhance and improve the taste, flavour and aroma of the local food, even traditional cooking methods with authentic ingredients from the local destination must be introduced to allure the tourists which could further be used as a marketing tool for the gastronomic promotion.



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