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Exploring Chef Perceptions of Traditional Menu Items: A Case Study of a 5-Star Hotel in Sandton

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Abstract

This study explores chefs' perceptions and decision-making processes regarding integrating traditional South African dishes into fine dining menus, using a 5-star hotel in Sandton as a case study. Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory, the research examines how chefs navigate the cultural, operational, and market-driven complexities of incorporating indigenous ingredients within a luxury hospitality context. Through qualitative methods, the study reveals that chef attitudes, normative expectations, and institutional constraints significantly shape menu design and culinary innovation. While chefs express strong cultural reverence for traditional cuisine, practical limitations such as ingredient sourcing, procurement policies, and presentation concerns often impede full integration. However, when supported by cultural capital and organisational readiness, chefs can elevate traditional dishes into premium culinary experiences. The findings underscore the potential for traditional cuisine to enhance sustainability, food tourism, and destination branding, while also contributing to a more inclusive and culturally grounded fine dining landscape. This research provides empirical insight into the role of chefs as cultural mediators and offers strategic implications for hospitality stakeholders aiming to align authenticity with profitability.

Keywords: Fine dining, chef attitudes, traditional cuisine, 5-star hotel, menu design

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Introduction

The fine dining restaurant industry has long been associated with culinary innovation and elevated customer experiences. In South Africa, this sector intersects increasingly with the rise of food tourism, driven by a growing appetite for authentic, locally rooted cuisine, especially in luxury hospitality settings such as high-end hotels and resorts (Otengei & Ahebwa, 2020). Globally, there is mounting interest in gastronomic experiences that reflect cultural identity and sustainable practices (Kalatzidakis, 2018; Zocchi & Fontefrancesco, 2020). In response, fine dining establishments face pressure to evolve to meet shifting consumer expectations and create distinctive, culturally meaningful dining narratives (Lillford & Hermansson, 2021). Within this landscape, fine dining restaurants are under pressure to evolve to meet shifting customer expectations (Lillford & Hermansson, 2021) and remain relevant by differentiating themselves through meaningful cultural narratives. Despite this global momentum, traditional South African dishes remain marginal within luxury dining. Historically dismissed as "simplistic" or "food for the poor" (Bentley, 2015; Marlene, 2015 in du Rand & Fisher, 2020), these dishes have suffered from apartheid-era stigmas, insufficient marketing (Tuomainen, 2018; Adjonyoh, 2017), and limited industry support (Moora & Dominic, 2020, in Fisher & du Rand, 2022). As a result, indigenous cuisine has struggled to secure a place on fine dining menus. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic opened new opportunities for promoting traditional cuisine through the rise of domestic tourism and an increasingly diverse middle class with strong cultural awareness (Bata, 2021; Michael & Fusté-Forné, 2022). This momentum has drawn attention to gastronomy tourism as a key driver of destination competitiveness. However, despite the expanding global literature on indigenous cuisine (Yu & Lu, 2021; du Rand & Fisher, 2020), there remains a critical gap in understanding how such cuisine is integrated—or resisted—within the fine dining spaces of South Africa. Menu design plays a central role in shaping perceptions and profitability (Mills & Thomas, 2008; Lai et al., 2019), making it a powerful tool for influencing how traditional dishes are presented and received. While some chefs have begun incorporating traditional elements into modern menus—fusing ancestral techniques with contemporary plating (Ler, 2020)—this practice is not yet widespread. According to du Rand & Fisher (2020), there is a need to examine the reasons behind chefs' reluctance to embrace traditional cuisine in luxury settings fully. Given the country's rich biodiversity and culinary heritage, it is timely and necessary to explore how local ingredients can be repositioned within high-end hospitality settings. The variation in customer preferences and the degree of chef engagement with indigenous ingredients remain underexplored in South Africa, particularly in urban luxury settings like Sandton.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the factors that inform chefs' perceptions and decisions regarding the inclusion of traditional dishes on the menus of a five-star hotel in Sandton. Specifically, it investigates the factors that inform their perceptions and decisions regarding including traditional South African dishes on luxury menus. Subsequently, it seeks to respond to the question of what influences chefs' decisions to include or exclude traditional South African dishes in the menu of five-star hotels in Sandton. This research contributes to the emerging discourse on gastro-tourism and offers locally grounded insights into the role of culinary professionals in preserving and promoting indigenous food heritage. This research contributes

to the emerging discourse on gastro-tourism and offers locally grounded insights into the role of culinary professionals in preserving and promoting indigenous food heritage. It addresses a notable gap in the literature on integrating traditional cuisine into luxury dining spaces in South Africa. It advocates for a more substantial alignment between gastronomy and tourism destination marketing, akin to global leaders such as France, Italy, China, and Japan (Lai et al., 2018).

Literature review

Including traditional cuisine in fine dining has attracted growing scholarly attention, particularly in luxury hospitality and culinary tourism. As consumer preferences increasingly favour authenticity, sustainability, and culturally immersive experiences, high-end restaurants face complex challenges in incorporating indigenous ingredients and recipes into modern, upscale menus. This literature review critically explores existing research on chef perceptions of traditional dishes, focusing on the cultural, operational, and strategic factors that shape menu design and culinary decision-making. The review is framed by Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour, which provides insight into the attitudinal, normative, and control-related influences affecting chefs' choices, and Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory, which helps contextualise how cultural legitimacy, taste hierarchies, and professional capital impact the valuation of traditional cuisine in luxury contexts. Drawing on global and South African perspectives, this review aims to synthesise key themes to illuminate how these dynamics play out within the fine dining sector, particularly in the institutional setting of a five-star hotel in Sandton.

Cultural significance and marginalisation of traditional South African dishes

South Africa's culinary identity is deeply informed by its multicultural composition, often described as "Rainbow Cuisine" (Long, 2013). Du Rand & Fisher (2020) categorise this diversity into four broad cultural streams; Coloured, Indian, African, and European; each contributing distinct culinary practices and food traditions. Dishes such as bobotie, umngqusho, chakalaka, and boerewors serve as sources of nourishment and repositories of cultural memory, social identity, and historical continuity.
Despite their significance, traditional South African foods remain marginal within the fine dining sphere. This exclusion is partly explicable through Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital, which posits that culinary legitimacy is socially constructed and often shaped by elite taste cultures. In this framework, foods associated with working-class or indigenous communities are frequently devalued in haute cuisine settings, seen as lacking refinement or symbolic prestige. These perceptions contribute to a taste hierarchy in which traditional dishes are relegated to informal or domestic culinary spaces, rather than celebrated in luxury environments. However, emerging culinary models challenge this paradigm. A notable example is Wolfgat in Paternoster, which has gained international acclaim for elevating indigenous ingredients and traditional cooking methods within a fine dining context. Recognised as Africa's Best Restaurant by the World's 50 Best Restaurants (Wills et al., 2024), Wolfgat exemplifies how local culinary heritage can be successfully reframed through innovative presentation, foraging practices, and minimalist plating, effectively repositioning cultural capital within a contemporary gastronomic idiom.

Chefs as cultural intermediaries in fine dining

Chefs are central in shaping dining experiences and preserving food heritage, particularly within the luxury dining sector. They must balance the demands of authenticity, sustainability, and innovation while navigating institutional and operational constraints (Kocevski & Risteski, 2020). In hotel kitchens, more so than in independent restaurants, procurement policies, supplier limitations, and menu standardisation pose barriers to including indigenous ingredients (Ulker & Karamustafa, 2023). Despite these challenges, many chefs revere cultural authenticity and engage creatively to reinterpret traditional dishes using fine dining techniques (Batat & De Kerviler, 2019). These chefs must often collaborate with local farmers and niche suppliers to secure authentic ingredients (Ozdemir et al., 2015; Anderson, 2018). In doing so, they preserve culinary heritage and foster economic and social ties within local communities (Fusté-Forné & Noguer-Junca, 2024).

Behavioural and cultural theories explaining menu decisions

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) in Ajzen, (1991) offers a valuable lens through which to examine chef decision-making. According to TPB, behaviour is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. It is a psychological theory explaining how people engage in a particular behaviour. In the culinary context, this theory elucidates why chefs may support traditional cuisine in principle but hesitate to implement it due to barriers such as lack of knowledge, training, or institutional support (Youn & Kim, 2018; Shukri, 2017). Figure 2 proposes an adaptation of TPB to explain the intention-behaviour gap: chefs may value traditional dishes but avoid them due to concerns over guest receptiveness, food safety, presentation, or sourcing logistics. Moreover, subjective norms, such as consumer preferences and industry trends, significantly motivate or dissuade chefs from incorporating indigenous ingredients (Caliskan & Yilmaz, 2016; Vlachou et al., 2024). Nevertheless, this study is guided by Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital (TCC) and Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which provide a framework for understanding the exclusion of indigenous cuisine from fine dining. Bourdieu's theory explains how class-based taste hierarchies and symbolic power devalue traditional dishes, making them appear incompatible with luxury dining norms (Bourdieu, 1984). TPB adds a behavioural dimension by illustrating how chefs' positive attitudes toward indigenous food may be overridden by social pressures and perceived institutional constraints (Ajzen, 1991). Together, these theories reveal how cultural bias, and operational barriers contribute to the marginalisation of indigenous cuisine in high-end hospitality settings.

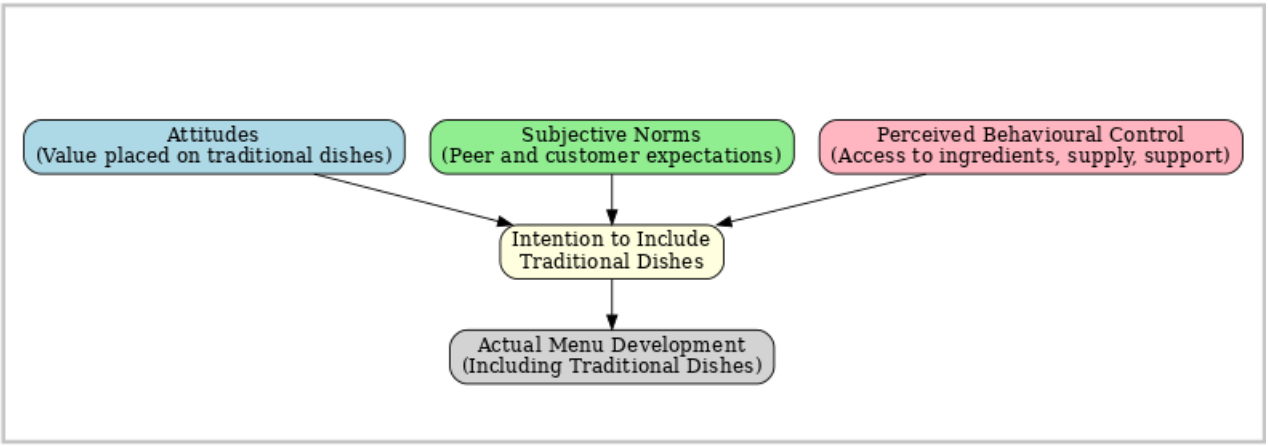

Figure 2: Adaptation of Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) as practical barriers for chefs in using traditional dishes in menu development

Global sustainability trends and the revival of traditional cuisine

Incorporating traditional and indigenous ingredients into fine dining increasingly aligns with global culinary movements and broader sustainability goals. Scholars such as Freedman (2021) & Moskin (2011) have documented parallel trends in the United States and Europe, particularly within the "farm-to-table" and New Nordic Cuisine movements, which prioritise locality, seasonality, and ethical sourcing. These culinary philosophies have influenced chefs worldwide, including South Africa, where practitioners, especially in the Western Cape, draw inspiration from these frameworks to elevate indigenous foods within refined dining formats. In response to environmental concerns and consumer demand, chefs increasingly adopt seasonal, locally focused menus and integrate sustainability into their practices through sourcing models that reflect "farm-to-table" values (Fusté-Forné & Noguer-Junca, 2024). Such initiatives contribute to the achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), by encouraging environmentally conscious sourcing, supporting local agriculture, and minimising food waste (Anderson, 2018).

Menu design as a tool for cultural storytelling and customer connection

Menu design serves as a marketing tool and a medium for cultural storytelling and sustainability messaging (Mills & Thomas, 2008; Lai et al., 2019; Hubert et al., 2017). Strategically crafted menus enhance customer engagement by incorporating narratives and emotional cues that elevate authenticity and perceived value (Anderson, 2018; Usunier & Cestre, 2007). Tourists, in particular, seek immersive culinary experiences that reflect local culture (Kalaitzidakis, 2018; Temizel, 2023), with emotional attachment, health perceptions, and curiosity shaping their openness to indigenous cuisine (Choe & Kim, 2018; Bertella, 2020). Studies also show that tourists often pay more for authentic dishes when supported by quality and compelling storytelling (Levitt et al., 2020; De Boni et al., 2019).

Institutional barriers to the integration of traditional dishes

Despite growing consumer demand and chef interest, several constraints hinder the integration of traditional dishes into hotel fine dining menus. These include restrictive procurement policies, lack of chef training, health regulations, and management hesitance (Vlachou et al., 2024; Ishak et al., 2023). Effective implementation thus requires organisational readiness, which involves managerial support, staff education, and institutional flexibility. Chefs often adapt traditional recipes to meet contemporary tastes and operational realities, which may result in a loss of authenticity (Ji et al., 2016). Overcoming this challenge involves strategic adaptation; blending tradition with modern culinary techniques; to maintain cultural integrity while enhancing palatability and aesthetic appeal (Nemeschansky, 2020; Kim et al., 2018).

Synthesis: Toward a holistic understanding of indigenous cuisine in fine dining

The literature highlights a complex interplay between cultural authenticity, sustainability, customer expectations, and institutional constraints in integrating traditional cuisine into fine dining. Chefs in luxury settings, such as five-star hotels in Sandton, serve as cultural mediators, capable of elevating indigenous dishes through creativity, collaboration, and the mobilisation of cultural capital. Successful integration of traditional South African foods into upscale menus depends on culinary innovation, strategic institutional support, and consumer education. Theories such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Bourdieu's Cultural Capital framework offer valuable lenses for understanding the decision-making processes behind menu design, providing critical insights for scholars, chefs, and tourism stakeholders alike.

Research methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore chef perceptions of menu design processes and outcomes of incorporating indigenous dishes in the restaurant industry (Mey, 2022). In-person semi-structured interviews were conducted over three months, providing contextual depth to the findings. The research followed an explanatory design, emphasising qualitative methods to explore human behaviour and provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Holloway & Wheeler, 2017; Morse, 2016). This approach enabled a comprehensive exploration of individual and institutional factors

shaping chefs' attitudes, including cultural identity, culinary training, perceived customer preferences, operational constraints, and challenges in integrating indigenous dishes. A semi-structured interview schedule was adapted using the 5W2H1E method by Vasconcelos (2015) & Schwartz (2011). The 5W2H1E framework is a systematic analytical tool that facilitates comprehensive inquiry by addressing seven critical dimensions: "Why" (purpose or rationale), "What" (object or content), "Who" (actors or stakeholders), "Where" (context or setting), "When" (temporal aspects), "How" (processes or methods), "How much" (resources or costs), and "Effect" (outcomes or impact). In this study, the framework was applied to structure interview questions exploring chefs' perceptions of traditional menu items in a five-star hotel in Sandton. This approach enabled a multidimensional analysis of the factors influencing how and why traditional dishes are conceptualised, adapted, or excluded in luxury dining contexts. By systematically mapping these dimensions, the study captured the operational, cultural, and strategic considerations chefs navigate when integrating indigenous cuisine into fine dining, offering a holistic understanding of their attitudes and decision-making processes. The study area was located in Sandton, Johannesburg, South Africa's leading financial and hospitality hub, boasting 42 hotel establishments, including the highest concentration of 5-star hotels in Gauteng (Chauke, 2022; South African Hotel.com, n.d.). The area attracts high-end local and international tourists, making it a strategic location for exploring fine dining trends and culinary innovations. This study adopts a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of integrating Indigenous cuisine in restaurant menus, aligning with research emphasising the value of qualitative insights in exploring culinary experiences (Ishak et al., 2023; Bryman, 2016). Data was collected by the researcher and analysed as follows: A purposive sampling strategy, commonly employed in qualitative research to select information-rich participants (Creswell et al., 2017), was used to recruit 15 key senior chefs (n-15) involved in the menu design process. The participants were selected from two fine dining restaurants within the 5-star hotel. The sample included senior chefs in management roles with direct experience in menu design, ensuring insight into kitchen practices, regional food accessibility, and culinary identity. All participants had worked at the 5-star hotels in the Sandton precinct for more than five years. Among them, 25% were female and 75% were male. Additionally, 13 participants were from diverse ethnic South African backgrounds, while two were European South Africans. Four participants had completed high school, whereas the remaining 11 had attained college or university-level education. Table 1 presents the generalised sample profile.

Table 1: Overview of respondents' profiles (n=15)

Sample		
1. Gender	Male	12
	Female	3
2. Position	Executive Chef	1
	Executive Sous Chef	5
	Senior Sous Chefs	6
	Sous Chefs	1
	Junior Sous Chefs	2
3. Working Experience	5 years	1
	6-10 years	4
	Over 12 years	10
4. Education	Senior High School	4
	University/College	11

Data collected was recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. This approach ensured key topics were addressed while allowing for flexibility to explore emergent themes (Kallio et al., 2016; Bezuidenhout, 2018). The use of open-ended questions allowed for in-depth exploration of chefs' perspectives, focusing on the challenges they encountered when incorporating indigenous ingredients and dishes, the strategic considerations guiding menu design in relation to target audiences and culinary identity, and their feedback on the inclusion of indigenous menu items.

Follow-up questions further explored menu design, ingredient sourcing, customer education, and operational logistics. To analyse the data, interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis, a method suited for identifying patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic coding was conducted using ATLAS.TI software facilitates systematic data organisation and theme development (Talanquer, 2014). Following the approach outlined by Dawadi (2020), the analysis began with repeated readings of transcripts to achieve data familiarisation, followed by coding to highlight key patterns related to the integration of indigenous ingredients in menus. These codes were then grouped into broader themes such as cultural authenticity, ingredient accessibility, and customer engagement. The Gastronomic Systems Research (GSR) Framework (Cuevas et al., 2021) further informed the analysis by situating chefs' decisions within the cultural and contextual factors shaping consumer food choices. Through iterative refinement and team discussions, the themes were critically evaluated and consolidated to ensure both rigour and coherence in the interpretation of findings (Thompson, 2022).

Gastronomic Systems Research (GSR) Framework (Cuevas et al., 2021) was used to understand and contextualise culture-specific consumer food choices within gastronomic systems. By considering the cultural and contextual factors that influence food choices, this framework aided in identifying the drivers behind chefs' decisions to include traditional dishes on menus. The study received approval from the University of Johannesburg's ethics committee, ensuring that all participants were informed about the study's purpose, data use, and confidentiality. Written consent was obtained from all interview participants to protect their privacy.

Results

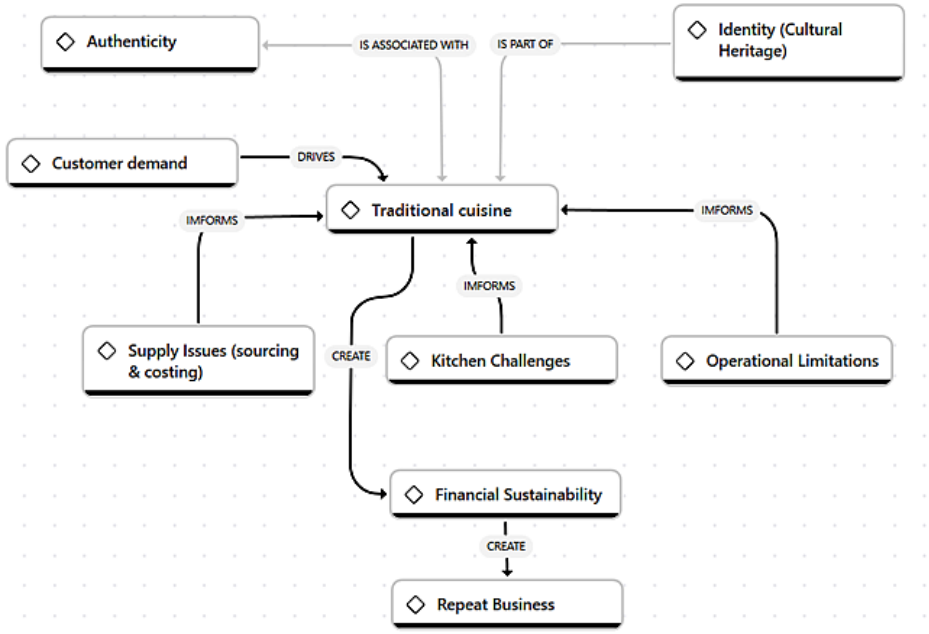

Figure 3: Coded themes and relationships for chef perceptions of traditional menu items

Defining traditional cuisine

The data revealed nuanced professional perspectives on culinary traditions' construction, preservation, and communication. Chefs defined traditional cuisine as representing the culinary heritage of a region, often passed down through generations and rooted in storytelling, family traditions, and cultural practices. These dishes are considered a reflection of community identity and cultural continuity. Chef # 6 stated: "Traditional cuisine represents the culinary heritage of a region, passed down through generations. It reflects traditional ingredients, cooking techniques, and cultural significance, often rooted in storytelling and family traditions." Another explained: "Traditional dishes define a community's identity. They are prepared using age-old methods, often with minimal alterations, and hold deep emotional and historical value." Chef # 3 added, "Traditional cuisine is about authenticity. It is the food that connects people to their roots. It is not just about ingredients; it is about how and why dishes were created, carrying the spirit of a region through taste, technique, and history."

Authenticity and identity

Authenticity and identity emerged as dominant themes. Chefs stressed the importance of age-old methods and minimal alterations in maintaining authenticity. Food was viewed as a cultural expression and medium for transmitting values and traditions across generations.

Customer demand and menu inclusion

All 15 chefs cited customer demand as the key driver for including traditional menu dishes. Guest preferences, financial viability, and competitive positioning influenced their decisions. Integration of traditional dishes was seen as a strategic response to customer expectations and business sustainability. Chef #6 highlighted the significance of aligning menu changes with customer trends and a clear culinary vision: "Customer trends identify what is trending and demanded by the public. Sensibility: Why are you changing, and for what purpose? Financial: this is the reason you will stay in business."

Use of traditional ingredients

Approximately 50% of menu items incorporated traditional ingredients, primarily influenced by the local or African demographic of patrons. Chefs saw this as a commitment to authenticity and a strategic alignment with customer expectations. Chef #3 remarked: "The use of local ingredients reflects our commitment to authenticity, as well as a way to honour the traditions and tastes of our community." Chef #8 echoed this sentiment: "Traditional dishes represent both a market demand and a way of showcasing the rich culinary heritage of the region, which is important for our restaurant's identity."

Operational and logistical challenges

All the chefs reported challenges such as ingredient sourcing, staff training, longer preparation times, and the complexity of adapting traditional techniques to modern kitchen workflows. These challenges were acknowledged and seen as opportunities to enhance storytelling and guest experiences. Chef #11 noted: "Serving traditional dishes in a modern restaurant setting comes with several challenges. First, authenticity vs. innovation; how do you honour the dish's heritage while refining it for contemporary dining? Striking this balance is crucial. Ingredient sourcing is another major hurdle. Many traditional recipes

rely on indigenous or seasonal ingredients that may not always be available, making consistency difficult." "Operational challenges such as staff training, longer preparation times, and the complexity of adapting traditional techniques to high-end kitchen workflows can add pressure. Despite these obstacles, when done right, traditional cuisine can be a powerful storytelling tool that enhances the dining experience." Chef # 5 added

Financial sustainability

Respondents indicated that traditional dishes increase sales and revenue by attracting local customers. Sales mix analysis and guest feedback assessed menu effectiveness and profitability. Chef #2 stated: "Yes, it does; traditional cuisine is by customer demand; if you cater for your traditional customer needs and flavours, you will attract more local customers, and your sales will increase, and also your revenues will reciprocate the increase." All chefs noted: "Customer demand and preferences for the menu items they order inform us. Waiters help us adapt those dishes to the customer preference by giving us feedback, and analysing sales also informs us on profitability." Chef #5 further confirmed: "Traditional cuisine appeals to our current customers as evidenced by the popularity of these dishes, as informed by the sales mix results per dish performance on the menu." A third emphasised: "The response is justified by assessing customer feedback, sales data, and the popularity of traditional dishes. Success in menu planning is evaluated by comparing the cost of ingredients and preparation to the revenue generated by traditional cuisine dishes. Our monthly revenue numbers confirm this."

Brand strategy alignment

Chefs confirmed that top management mandated traditional cuisine as part of the hotel's branding strategy. Including traditional dishes serves both local and international guests seeking authentic experiences, contributing to customer loyalty and market differentiation. A respondent noted: "We discovered that our traditional customer base is key to our success, and we then cater accordingly, which in turn also caters for our foreign guests who want to experience traditional flavours."

Fine dining integration

Traditional cuisine was compatible with fine dining when adapted using modern techniques. Chefs emphasised the importance of preserving cultural essence while meeting high-end dining expectations. Gastro-tourism and destination marketing were cited as benefits of featuring traditional dishes. Chef #9 stated: "Traditional dishes absolutely belong in fine dining." Chef #2 elaborated: "Yes, you have to adapt to the needs of your local environment, as this will be core to your success. Fine dining restaurants should adapt their menu planning to feature traditional cuisine, especially in the context of gastro-tourism and destination marketing."

Chef capabilities and menu innovation

The entire cohort of chefs demonstrated a blend of culinary expertise and managerial skills. Themes included adaptability, resource management, leadership, and entrepreneurship. Innovation and creativity were critical to menu success and customer satisfaction.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the central role chefs play in preserving and innovating traditional cuisine within a high-end hospitality context. The chefs' collective definition of traditional cuisine reflects a deep connection to cultural heritage, aligning with the view that food acts as a medium for expressing identity and transmitting values (Lee et al., 2021). The theme of authenticity was strongly emphasised. Chefs viewed traditional dishes as culinary outputs and as carriers of history and emotion. This corroborates with Ozdemir et al. (2016), who emphasised the importance of subjective norms and cultural values in shaping culinary decisions. The insistence on using age-old methods indicates a desire to maintain the integrity of culinary heritage, even in modernisation. The prominence of customer demand in influencing menu design confirms that chefs are responsive to market forces, aligning with Nemeschansky (2020) and Ramli et al. (2020). Traditional dishes are not just preserved for nostalgic value; they are strategically used to attract and retain customers, proving their commercial viability. This is further supported by the chefs' use of sales data and guest feedback to inform decision-making. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) offers a helpful framework for interpreting these findings. According to TPB, behavioural intentions are influenced by attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). In this study, chefs' attitudes towards traditional cuisine were overwhelmingly positive, seeing it as valuable for cultural preservation and business strategy. Subjective norms, reflected in customer expectations and managerial mandates—strongly influenced the inclusion of traditional dishes on menus. Finally, perceived behavioural control was evident in chefs navigating operational challenges such as ingredient sourcing and staff training. These dimensions of TPB collectively shaped chefs' intentions and actions, illustrating how internal motivations and external pressures guided their culinary decisions. However, the chefs also highlighted operational constraints. Ingredient availability, staff training, and the complexity of adapting traditional methods to modern kitchen workflows reflect ongoing tensions between tradition and efficiency. Fisher & du Rand (2022) and Nebioglu (2020) noted challenges in integrating indigenous ingredients and methods into professional kitchens. The duality of these perspectives; viewing these barriers as challenges and storytelling opportunities—suggests a nuanced understanding of innovation. Traditional cuisine was also recognised as an important branding tool. The chefs' acknowledgement of top-down directives to feature traditional items shows alignment between culinary practice and corporate strategy. Madawala et al. (2024)

found that aligning indigenous cuisine with brand identity enhances customer loyalty and market differentiation, a finding echoed here. The discussion also reveals that traditional cuisine can coexist with fine dining through modernisation without losing authenticity. This supports Tuomainen's (2018) argument that modern adaptations of heritage dishes can align with the aesthetic and technical standards of haute cuisine. The chefs' views on storytelling through food and cultural tourism also align with studies by Seyitoglu (2017) and Fusté-Forné & Masip (2020), highlighting the value of local food experiences in destination branding.

Finally, the importance of a chef's capabilities extends beyond cooking. Strategic thinking, adaptability, leadership, and entrepreneurship were essential competencies. This aligns with Townsend et al. (2018), Harms & Swery (2020), and Celebi et al. (2021), who emphasise the multifaceted roles chefs must play in navigating culinary innovation and operational sustainability. Cultural Capital Theory (CCT), as proposed by Bourdieu (1986), offers a valuable lens through which to understand the findings of this study. The chefs' emphasis on authenticity, tradition, and storytelling suggests that their culinary practices are economically motivated and serve to accumulate and express cultural capital. By curating traditional dishes, chefs engage in cultural reproduction that affirms their legitimacy as cultural agents within the hospitality industry. Their ability to preserve and elevate indigenous cuisine within a fine dining context enhances their symbolic capital, reinforcing their professional status and authority. Moreover, the preference for traditional ingredients and methods can be seen as a form of embodied cultural capital, where knowledge, skills, and aesthetic sensibilities are transmitted through lived experience and practice. This theoretical framing underscores how culinary decisions are shaped by the desire to gain distinction and recognition within a field structured by market and cultural values (Bourdieu, 1986; Johnston & Baumann, 2007). In summary, the discussion illustrates that including traditional cuisine in a 5-star hotel setting is both a cultural and economic strategy. It requires a delicate balance between authenticity and innovation, market responsiveness, and managerial acumen. These findings provide critical insight into how traditional food practices can be preserved and celebrated in modern culinary landscapes. This study makes an important contribution by exploring how fine dining chefs in South Africa perceive and decide on including traditional dishes in luxury hotel menus. It fills a gap in the literature by focusing on the role of chefs as key players in promoting or resisting the integration of indigenous cuisine in high-end dining spaces. The research offers new insights into how cultural heritage, customer expectations, and commercial pressures influence menu decisions in urban five-star hotels. It also provides practical guidance for the hospitality and tourism industries on how traditional dishes can be used to create unique dining experiences and strengthen destination branding. By connecting culinary heritage with luxury dining and gastro-tourism, this study brings a fresh perspective to both academic research and industry practice.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that chefs in fine dining establishments occupy a critical nexus between cultural preservation and culinary innovation, with their perceptions and decisions significantly shaping the presence of traditional cuisine on luxury menus. In the context of a 5-star hotel in Sandton, the integration of indigenous dishes is not merely a gastronomic choice, but a complex behavioural outcome influenced by individual attitudes, normative pressures, and perceived control, as articulated in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Chefs' willingness to engage with traditional menu items is shaped by internal motivations to promote authenticity, external expectations from diners and management, and practical constraints related to sourcing, skills, and institutional readiness. Simultaneously, Bourdieu's (1984) theory of Cultural Capital reveals how culinary hierarchies and class-based perceptions contribute to the marginalisation of indigenous foods within elite dining spaces. However, this study finds that when chefs possess sufficient cultural capital—knowledge, appreciation, and creativity—they can reframe traditional ingredients as premium, innovative elements of fine dining. The success of this reframing, as seen in the Sandton case, is contingent on a strategic balance between authenticity and aesthetic appeal and chefs' ability to transform perceived culinary limitations into opportunities for differentiation and storytelling. Empirical findings further highlight that chefs play a decisive role in advancing food tourism and sustainability by aligning menu design with cultural identity and evolving consumer preferences. This study provides practical insight into how traditional South African cuisine can be repositioned as a luxury offering, contributing to broader efforts in destination branding, culinary tourism, and economic development. As previous studies have shown (Ishak et al., 2023; Otengei & Ahebwa, 2020; Gordin et al., 2016), traditional dishes enhance experiential value and customer engagement, and this research adds new empirical depth by detailing the organisational, behavioural, and symbolic mechanisms underpinning their successful integration. This research contributes to the evolving discourse on culinary authenticity and innovation in hospitality studies by bridging behavioural theory with cultural critique. It underscores the importance of institutional support, chef training, and stakeholder collaboration in advancing sustainable gastronomy. Future research should further explore the long-term impact of integrating traditional cuisine on chef identity, customer loyalty, and competitive positioning within the luxury dining market.

The study faces several limitations. These include a potentially small or non-representative sample size, which may affect the generalisability of the findings. The geographic focus on Sandton may limit the applicability of the results to other regions. Subjectivity in guest and chef perceptions, cultural biases, and the specific hotel context could further influence the findings. Furthermore, the study did not explore consumer health. Additionally, time constraints, potential biases in data collection, and external factors like economic shifts or communication barriers may impact the study's accuracy. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. Future research could investigate strategies for educating diners about the cultural significance of indigenous ingredients through storytelling and immersive dining experiences. Additionally, exploring sustainable sourcing practices and their economic impact on traditional communities would provide valuable insights.

Studies could also examine how organisational readiness and staff acceptance influence the successful integration of traditional dishes into fine dining menus.

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