

A Model of Malaysian Food Image Components: Towards Building a Sustainable Tourism Product

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ABSTRACT

Food is becoming an important or a critical motivating factor for travellers when choosing a destination. Past scholars found that images could trigger imagination besides being a worthy basis for marketing strategy. Therefore, it is absolutely imperative to identify the food characteristics that form images prior to promoting and selling of the local food so as to draw more tourists to the country. Given the fact that a limited literature has been found on exploring food images in Malaysia, an attempt to conduct an exploratory research was therefore made. This study aimed at determining the definitions of Malaysian food, as well as the characteristics and types of food that best depict Malaysian gastronomy culture. Four focus groups were conducted, and these consisted of general public and practitioners from the food industry in Malaysia. The data were then verbatim transcribed and analysed using a coding system. The information obtained from this study is anticipated to assist marketers in developing a comprehensive strategic marketing plan that focuses on targeting food tourists. The paper ends with feasible enforcements suggested to assist catalysing growth in the food tourism industry in Malaysia.

Keywords: Malaysian food, food image, tourism product, food tourism, Malaysia, qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry in Malaysia is one of the largest economic generators for the

country; however, with a stiff competition, there are many challenges faced by the government in promoting the country locally and abroad (Segumpan *et al.*, 2008). Issues such as 9/11 bombing in 2001, Bali bombing in 2002, the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Iraq war in 2003, and Tsunami in 2004

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caused negative impacts on the global tourism which has significantly slowed down. Nevertheless, Malaysia Tourism Promotional Board (MTPB) is continuously striving to assure travellers that Malaysia is a tourist haven.

Based on the statistics provided by the Ministry of Tourism Malaysia (MOTOUR), the tourism industry in Malaysia has shown a positive growth. In 2007, for instance, there were a total of 20,972,822 tourist arrivals. Meanwhile in 2008, the number of tourist arrivals increased to 22,052,488 and the percentage change in the arrival figure was a positive increase of 5.1%. In a report by World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2008, *as cited in Segumpan et al.*, 2008, p. 130), Malaysia was cited to have increased approximately 20% in terms of the international tourism growth rate. Therefore, the industry is believed to be a progressive contributor to the nation's economic affluence, such as the revenue for the country, employment and income for the local people (Aziz & Zainol, 2009).

The government of Malaysia has been tremendously supportive in marketing Malaysia globally. In addition, substantial financial resources were allocated to develop potential tourist destinations to further enhance the tourism industry in Malaysia (Segumpan *et al.*, 2008). Similarly, countless strategies were launched by MOTOUR to induce the influx of tourist to the country. For example, the launching of Visit Malaysia Year 2007 with different enthralling themes, such as Beautiful Malaysia, Only Malaysia, Fascinating

Malaysia, Colours of Malaysia and a tagline of 'Malaysia Truly Asia', had significantly increased the number of tourists to the country (Hamzah, 2004; MTPB, 2009).

Food was found to be an imperative sub-element that is able to add values to a holiday amid destination is commonly seen as the foci in trips (Quan & Wang, 2004). Consequently, food has been perceived as a crucial source of providing experiences to tourists and viable images for marketing purpose (Quan & Wang, 2004). It was argued by Kivela and Crotts (2006) that not all destinations could be benefitted by nature's beauty, such as forest, sun, sea and sand; therefore, food or gastronomy should be viewed as a feasible alternative for promotional measures. Moreover, Tellström *et al.* (2006) claimed that local and regional food images are influential on consumers' mind as food could trigger human's senses (namely, sight, sound, taste, smell and touch). From the cultural perspective, food represents the roots and identity of a community. Tourists are able to experience the beliefs, norms, culture and traditions through consumption of a community's cuisine (Okumus *et al.*, 2007).

It has been generally accepted that image plays an imperative role in influencing an individual's perceived image, choice of destination, satisfaction and behavioural intentions (Chon, 1991; Bigne *et al.*, 2001; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Gallarza *et al.*, 2002; Lee *et al.*, 2005). Image consigs a visual illustration from the psychological perspective, whereas from the marketing perspective, an image is composed of

attributes that underlie it and the image is believed to be interrelated with consumer behaviour (Jenkins, 1999). Therefore, to facilitate a memorable food experience for tourists, a well-bound set of characteristics reflecting precise Malaysian food image should be projected to attract tourists as a preceding action to determine their motivation to visit and be satisfied with Malaysian gastronomic products.

Malaysian cuisine can be described as a kaleidoscope of appetizing tastes, interesting colours that exist in different forms and textures which stimulate and delight the palate. In addition to being attractive and enticing, Malaysian food is more than satisfying hunger and also contains nutritional and medicinal values according to traditional beliefs (Manderson, 1981). Generally, Malaysians are not restricted to cultural food, except for several food types that are constrained by religious taboos, such as pork for the Muslims, beef for the Hindus and any kind of meat for vegetarians (Manderson, 1981).

In Malaysian traditional food beliefs, food is categorised under hot and cold properties, in which these categories are believed to have effect on human's body (Manderson, 1981). Ingredients used in Malaysian cooking, especially herbs and spices, are food categorised as having 'hot' properties. Food with 'hot' properties is best to consume especially during rainy and cold weather to counter flu, flatulence and colds; for example, ginger, lemongrass, chillies, pepper, galangal and turmeric. In contrast, food with 'cold' properties, such

as vegetables and fruit, are generally used to reduce body heat during hot and sunny weather (Manderson, 1981).

Along with the traditional food beliefs that formed today's culinary practices in Malaysia, food-related cultures and events also play an important role in shaping Malaysian gastronomic experience (Jalis *et al.*, 2009). Festivals or religious celebrations are the connotations of food-related cultures and events in Malaysia; for instance, Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Chinese New Year, Deepavali, Hari Gawai and Moon-cake festival are significant events in Malaysia in which arrays of delicious food are served for feast in conjunction with the celebrations. Being blessed with delectable cuisine and a potpourri of cultures, Malaysia will surely serve as a food paradise to cater for food lovers with a tinge of fusion taste.

According to Wells (1982), the term 'tourists attractions' is very personal and it differs to travellers from different geographic regions; for example, the north-west Europeans may perceive tropical sunshine and beaches as an attraction to them but not to the travellers from other regions. Gearing *et al.* (1974) clustered 17 criteria of tourist attractions into five categories. The categories were 'natural factors', 'social factors', 'historical factors', 'recreational and shopping facilities' and 'infrastructure and food and shelter'. In a study by Hofmann (1979), tourist attractions in Peninsular Malaysia were found to include 'recreation', 'food', 'excursions', 'multi-ethnic society' and 'shopping'. However, Malaysia is being promoted more

vigorously on its sun, beaches, historical towns, nature-reserved recreational areas and even skyscrapers (Samsudin *et al.*, 1997; Liu, 2005; Aziz & Zainol, 2009). On the other hand, the Minister of Tourism Malaysia, Datuk Seri Dr Ng Yen Yen, cautioned that Malaysian food is facing a crisis of image and identity and this has led to confusion and ambiguity among tourists (Anonymous in Nan Yang Press, 2009). Therefore, food is an increasingly crucial factor to Malaysia's economy and also an urgent factor to be researched through intellectual pathways to address the literature deficit on Malaysian food image.

Past scholars claimed that food was viewed as merely a part of an entire destination's image and thus, research on food image has been ignored and/or not given much attention (Scarpato, 2002; Quan & Wang, 2004). Additionally, Hjalager and Corigliano (2000) argued that research on the relationship between food image and a tourist destination was incomplete and nebulous. Correspondingly, Selwood (2003) said that "food is very much overlooked and unsung component of the tourism literature" (Selwood, 2003, p. 178), although cuisine is increasingly having the potential to enhance a destination's image, satisfaction and repeat visitation (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Henderson, 2009). Besides, food was also claimed to be an influential tool for differentiating and imparting impacts on tourists' emotion (Quan & Wang, 2004; Henderson, 2009).

Hunt (1975), among the pioneers in destination image research, concluded

that image is a significant factor in a destination's success as the perceived image held by potential visitors about a destination may have impact upon the feasibility of that particular place as an attraction to tourists. Since then, there was a wide agreement among the tourism researchers and a conclusion indicating that image was critical to a destination's success was further strengthened. Meanwhile, Echtner and Ritchie (1993) further examined the concept of destination image and suggested a conceptual framework that consisted of three continuums; namely, attribute-holistic, functional-psychological, and common-unique axes. On the contrary, Gartner (1993, 1996) contributed to the destination image literature by illustrating that the images of a destination are developed by three interrelated components, which are cognitive, affective and conative. Alternatively, Gallarza *et al.* (2002) proposed a model based on four features, namely, complex, multiple, relativistic, and dynamic. Meanwhile, the existing literature has conceptualized the dimensions of destination image extensively, and a gap was identified – a lack of understanding on the food image dimensions, particularly from the Malaysian food perspective. There are a few key issues related to food in the tourism industry which remain unanswered or perplexing. The issues are such as the defining the terms of Malaysian food and Malaysian food culture.

To facilitate Malaysia as a successful food destination, image should be capitalized to depict its strengths and potential in food

tourism (Ecthner & Ritchie, 1993). To date, however, limited studies have been conducted using a qualitative approach to explore and define Malaysian food and to eventually build a theoretical model in relation to describing Malaysian food image. The main purpose of the current study was to gain a deeper insight into the characteristics of Malaysian food and Malaysian food culture among fellow Malaysians who are well-versed about Malaysian food, rather than to generalize outcomes from the tourists' perceptions of Malaysian food. This study is exploratory in nature and it was guided by three research questions which formed the groundwork for building a model that describes Malaysian food image. The research questions are as follows:

- RQ1: What is the definition of Malaysian food?
- RQ2: What are the characteristics that best depict Malaysian food culture?
- RQ3: What are the types of food that best represent Malaysia's multi-cultures and ethnics?

Conceptual Framework

Despite being a qualitative study, it was suggested that a general construct should be presented either graphically or in narrative form to explain the main components that are to be examined in the research (Fawcett & Downs, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Voss *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, a conceptual framework was proposed to avoid the researcher from deviating away from the research objectives. Fig.1 shows

the proposed components contributing to the structure of Malaysia's image as a prospective destination for food tourism. Arrows with solid lines proposed the interrelationship between the components. The components (definition, gastronomy characteristics and food types) were anticipated to have a circuitous relationship which reflects the image of Malaysian food. Meanwhile, the dotted arrow represents the proposed enforcement suggested to facilitate related authorities in the hospitality and tourism industry and to capitalize the country's wealth in gastronomic resources as a tourist attraction.

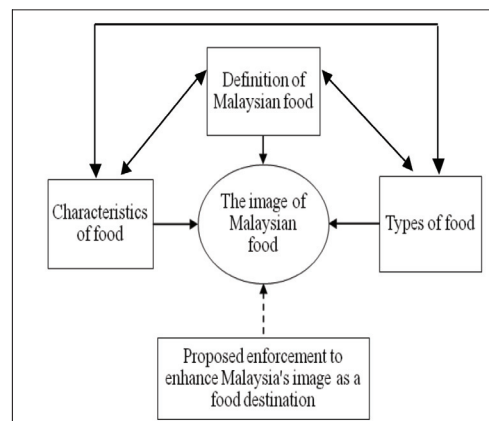


Fig.1: Conceptual Framework of Malaysia's image as a Food Tourism Destination

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach as it aimed to examine and identify the image of Malaysian food as a destination catalyst for food tourism demand. In specific, a focus group approach was used to understand the meanings and feelings that the informants attached to Malaysian food in depth (Krueger, 1994), rather than

to generalize findings to the population that might be achieved through survey questions (Kim *et al.*, 2009). Focus group is a small group of people brought together and guided by a moderator through an unstructured, spontaneous discussion about a topic (Krueger, 1994; Churchill, 2001; Burns & Bush, 2003). The aim of a focus group is to gather ideas, insights, feelings, perceptions and experiences about a particular issue (Krueger, 1994; Churchill, 2001).

Initially, five informants were recruited for individual in-depth semi-structured pilot interviews in January 2008 which was aimed to identify the clarity of the interview questions. Based on the pilot interviews and also past research on related issue, the questions were improved for better understanding and rigorousness. The finalized interview guide comprised of 10 semi-structured questions which were organized into four sections. The first section was aimed at understanding the meanings and definitions that the informants' attached to Malaysian food. The second section was designed to comprehend the informants' description of Malaysian food culture's characteristics. The third section focused on categorizing Malaysian food that best represents the country's multi-cultures and ethnics. The final section comprised of questions probing into potential actions to promote and market Malaysia as a budding destination to attract food tourists.

During the actual study, four focus groups were conducted from March to August 2008. Individuals participating in the focus group sessions were drawn from

various backgrounds, such as students (graduate levels), executive chefs, managers, fitness trainer, business owners, lecturers, food blogger as well as chef trainer. The informants were divided into two categories – 'food practitioner' and 'public'. Out of the total (31), 15 informants were classified under 'food practitioners' who formed two separate focus groups; whereas 16 others were in the 'public' category, also formed two separate focus groups. People who were trained in the area of food were placed under the category of 'food practitioner'. Informants who were not trained in the area of food were placed under the category of 'public'. The informants were identified through a criteria-based snowball sampling technique (Jankowicz, 2000; Tellström *et al.*, 2006; Kim *et al.*, 2009). This particular sampling technique is dependent upon the initial informants' referrals to generate additional informants (Breakwell *et al.*, 2000). For example, the initial informants were requested to refer associates to join the following focus group discussion.

Throughout the main fieldwork, the moderator was accountable to probe the informants without manipulating their views to uncover the topic more in depth (Krueger, 1994). Each focus group lasted roughly 120 to 150 minutes in a conversational mode. Discussions were recorded on three digital recorders and verbatim transcribed. In view of the fact that the focus group interviews generate large quantities of raw data, it was recommended by past scholars that an analysis should begin with data reduction to form a manageable size of data

in order to allow an easier identification of the underlying themes related to the study's objectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Krueger, 1994; Merriam, 1998). If words or phrases could not be deciphered on repeated listening, this would be indicated in the transcript and considered as lost data. No attempt was made to guess what had been said. The transcriptions were analyzed using the coding system.

As indicated earlier, the transcriptions were analyzed using the coding system. Inductive categorization method was applied which involved a classification of recurring themes found in a text passage (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Spiggle, 1994; Merriam, 1998). Subsequently, two independent coders processed the findings separately (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The objective of the coding analyses is to identify emerging themes from the open-ended responses from the focus groups; therefore, the analyses process was data driven (Spiggle, 1994).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Demographic Profile of the Informants

A total of 31 informants participated in the focus groups discussion. The participants were recruited through snowballing and judgemental methods, in which they were encouraged to recommend acquaintances with similar background, especially for the 'food practitioner' category (Jankowicz, 2000; Tellström *et al.*, 2006). Out of the 31 informants, there were 20 males and 11 females. The informants comprised of the three major races in Malaysia and one aborigine informant: 19 Malays, 7 Chinese,

4 Indians and one Bidayuh from the Dayak clan of Sarawak. The age of the informants ranged from 24 to 53 years. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of all the informants who had participated in the focus group interview.

Definition of Malaysian Food

The focus group interviews started with the informants from the public category and the initial definitions about Malaysian food were mostly on the sensory aspect of the food. Herbs, hot and spicy, as well as the various tastes that give an assortment of senses experience were found to be repeated munificently by the informants of the public group. The findings revealed that the informants from the public group focused more on the concrete factors about Malaysian food rather than other abstract factors (such as history, culture etc.) that had also contributed in forming Malaysian food. Therefore, the themes categorised under the public informants group are 'diverse sensory experience', 'hot and spicy' and 'meeting of cultures' (see Table 2).

Conversely, the food practitioners delineated Malaysian food in a broader perspective which includes the history and other influences that have formed the identity of the food nowadays. The themes classified under this particular group are 'cultural food', 'binding grounds' and 'meeting of cultures'. Majority of the informants started their descriptions with a brief history of the culture evolvement from the colonial times to the current, the major races and culture that formed the country,

TABLE 1
Informants' Demographic Profile.

No	Gender	Race	Age	Occupation	Category
1	M	Chinese	26	Application Engineer	A
2	F	Chinese	26	Marketing Executive	A
3	M	Malay	44	Postgraduate	A
4	F	Malay	28	Project Manager	A
5	M	Indian	31	Fitness Trainer	A
6	F	Bidayuh	33	Postgraduate	A
7	F	Chinese	25	Underwriting Officer	A
8	F	Malay	24	Postgraduate	A
9	M	Indian	33	Engineer	A
10	F	Chinese	24	Accounts Manager	A
11	F	Chinese	26	Human Resources Executive	A
12	M	Malay	36	Procurement Manager	A
13	F	Chinese	24	Postgraduate	A
14	F	Malay	36	Senior Management Executive	A
15	M	Malay	27	University Tutor	A
16	F	Chinese	31	Lecturer/Researcher	A
17	M	Indian	50	Chef Trainer	B
18	F	Malay	49	Executive Chef	B
19	M	Malay	53	Professional Chef	B
20	M	Malay	48	Executive Chef	B
21	M	Malay	39	Cost Controller	B
22	M	Malay	27	University Tutor	B
23	M	Malay	45	Executive Chef	B
24	M	Malay	46	Executive Chef	B
25	M	Malay	39	Offshore Catering Owner	B
26	M	Malay	39	Executive Chef	B
27	M	Malay	43	Executive Chef	B
28	M	Indian	44	Director of Culinary School	B
29	M	Malay	36	Executive Sous Chef	B
30	M	Malay	38	Food Blogger	B
31	M	Malay	44	In-Flight Operation Culinary Manager	B

Note:

A – Public Group

B – Food Practitioner Group

as well as some definitions of food through their own ideas of the subjective meaning portrayed by Malaysian food. For example, one of the food professionals defined Malaysian foods as a 'binding ground' to the people in the country; he had a statement as follows:

“The food is actually very enjoyable, I mean food actually bonds people in our country because if you see a lot of time we want to go for a ‘teh tarik’ (local tea/pulled tea) or when we want to eat food, it brings the close fellowship among us, it

TABLE 2
Definition of Malaysian Food.

Public Group		Food Practitioner Group	
Theme	Responses	Theme	Responses
Diverse Sensory Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •You have your tongue all the resources, one side each (taste). •Malaysian food is more towards salty (savoury), the heavy kind of taste. •We are definitely not bland. 	Cultural Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The best definition that we can have is the cultural food and how we used to eat. •When you talk about Malaysian, it is always a heritage, it is always a cultural like why do Chinese celebrate full moon with a certain kind of food.
Hot and Spicy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Yes, I think Malaysian food is more on spicy. •To Malaysians, food is the hotter the better. 	Binding Grounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •I would describe Malaysian food as the togetherness of all races; of all the ethnicities and this is the strong hold of our Malaysian food. •Food is a glue for all the races interactions in Malaysia.
Meeting of Cultures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •I agreed that every ethnic has their own dishes but there are some dishes in Malaysia which are actually derived from several races. •I think it (Malaysian food) is fusion between the Malay and Nyonya. 	Meeting of Cultures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Malaysian food is a mixture of whatever (culture) that we have. •I think our food has been fused for a long time, maybe back 500 years ago.

is a bonding factor. If it is here in our country, we actually eat a lot of time; we eat in the night, we eat in the morning, when we see friends we will sitting together and eating, so I would say I would describe that in our country in Malaysia, food bonds people. It brings friendship together; it brings family together.”

Though the definitions between the two groups of informants differed, an

overlapping theme was discovered. The informants in both groups expressed that Malaysian food is a food formed by “meeting of cultures”. For example, one informant from the public group denoted this by giving a simpler example of a daily dish, as follows:

“I agreed that every ethnic has their own dishes but there are some dishes in Malaysia actually are derived from several of races. For example, fish head curry; we

can use Malay spices and cook it in the Chinese way. So actually we get influence by all the ethnic in cooking some of the Malaysian dishes”

there were crossing of cooking styles, crossing of ingredients and then what happened was the acceptance and of course including consideration of the religious sensitivity as well”

Similarly, another informant from the food practitioner group also reflected likewise by explaining a little bit further into the evolvement of the culinary cultures along time:

“There was the time where food was very respective that means you have Malay cuisines, Chinese cuisines and Indian cuisines but then somewhere along the line, there were acceptance you know,

The Characteristics of Malaysian Food

It was found that both groups (public and food practitioners) had analogous views on the attributes that could be used to characterise Malaysian food. Eight themes were uncovered to be descriptive of the characteristics of Malaysian food. These themes covered the sensory qualities of the food and the food experiences in Malaysia. The informants also argued that the experience of tasting Malaysian food

TABLE 3
Malaysian Gastronomy Characteristics.

Theme	Responses
Tinged human senses	“Malaysian food is flavourful, for we are not shy about our taste. Malays, Chinese or Indians, if you tell them ‘makan’ (eat), the word is already full of flavours.”
Easy Access	“It is a ‘suicide helpline’ where you can get food anytime of the day to warm your stomach and heart.”
Unique	“It is unique to the senses and unique in the operating hours as we have stalls open 24 hours.”
Stylish	“You can eat curry in a very expensive restaurant and you can also find it at the hawker stalls by the roadside; so stylish referred to how you can go about the thing (dining atmosphere).”
Flavourful	“Malaysian food is so rich in flavours, it is so rich in colours and it has got a lot of herbs and spices that makes it very interesting. I would say that it is very fascinating.”
Alfresco dining atmosphere	“We dine outside although there are air-conditions but Malaysians always dine outside under the stars.”
Culinary adventure	“You can experience the different cooking styles, the culture involved and made in the food.”
Sample of cultures	“You get to interact with local people as the interaction is very important. Your eyes will look around and the people are bustling pass by you. Then you will see the hawkers, the fire here and there. So to me, that is great.”

also denotes the nature of Malaysian food culture, in which reflects the country's image as a food destination. Table 3 presents the themes with supporting quotes extracted from the interviews that refer to the description of Malaysian gastronomy characteristics.

Malaysian Food: A Representative of the Malaysian Gastronomic Culture

There were 49 types of food suggested by the informants in this study. However, only 18 items with the frequency value equal to or above 10 are presented in Table 4. "Sate" had the highest frequency (165) throughout the four focus group interviews. This is followed by 'Nasi Lemak' (coconut milk rice) which occurred 123 times. There were various versions of 'Laksa' suggested by the informants; for instance 'Laksa' from each state in Malaysia, 'Asam Laksa', curry 'Laksa' and others. To condense these data, all the types suggested were grouped under 'Laksa' varieties with 95 times of occurrence.

TABLE 4
Malaysian Food.

No	Type of food	Frequency
1	Sate	165
2	Nasi lemak	123
3	Laksa varieties	95
4	Roti canai	85
5	Rendang	71
6	Teh tarik	52
7	Char kuey teow	30
8	Lemang	28
9	Ulam	19
10	Bak kut teh/chi kut teh	18

Table 4 (continued)

11	Chicken rice	18
12	Ikan baker	15
13	Masak lemak	13
14	Sambal belacan	12
15	Murtabak	11
16	Nasi goring	11
17	Nasi kerabu	10
18	Ketupat	10

The food items given in Table 4 are common food types shared among fellow Malaysians, except for 'bak kut teh' (herbs soup with pork) which contains pork which is considered as unlawful in Islam. Due to cultural assimilation and understanding of each other's sensitivity, a new version of 'bak kut teh' i.e. 'chi kut teh' is made available for all the races in Malaysia to enjoy the good values and luscious taste of the soup which is made from a variety of herbs.

Most of the food types suggested by the informants were among the 100 food items listed as Malaysian national heritage which was announced by the Ministry of Unity, Culture, Arts and Heritage. The former minister of Unity, Culture, Arts and Heritage, Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal commented that protecting the national heritage items, under the National Heritage Act 2005, will make Malaysians appreciate and keep the country's heritage for future generations (Elis, 2009).

Actions Proposed to Enforce Malaysia as a Food Destination

The enforcements proposed to accelerate Malaysia as a food destination were

classified under three themes; namely, information resources, tourism product, and food activities. The themes were arranged in descending importance, where information resources were the main concern of all the informants in the study.

TABLE 5
Proposed Enforcements.

Theme	Proposed Enforcements
Information resources	Brochures
	Information booth
	Food destination map
	Kuala Lumpur, the basis for tourists' exposure
Tourism gastronomic product	Convenience pack food ingredients
Food activities	Food festival calendar year
	Food tourism as part of travel package

A quote extracted from an informant's conversation is as follows:

"Malaysian Tourism Board should inform what type of food (to be promoted) you know, circulated more food brochures to the public..."

Another informant suggested that more information booths should be set up for the convenience of tourists. The description is as follows:

"... In Kuala Lumpur area, Bukit Bintang has one booth and about 200m or 100m away they have another one (information centre) so the visitors can easily get information from the centre but it (information centre) is not enough."

Another addition to the same theme is regarding the map of food destinations in Malaysia. An informant suggested that hotels take an active role in promoting food tourism by inserting maps on food tourism in the country. The quote extracted is as follows:

"... Talking about food tourism, it is a very big, very huge (issue) and most of the pamphlets in hotels (in Malaysia), have no maps or information about food tourism. We should do a map of food tourism like in Selangor where is the best place to eat and so on."

Another informant suggested Kuala Lumpur as the starting point in educating tourists about food in Malaysia. The description was extracted as follows:

"... Kuala Lumpur has everything that you can find in other states which can be found in Kuala Lumpur to a certain extend. Except that of course in Penang, you'll get more authentic 'Char Kuey Teow', it's nicer and in Ipoh you'll get better 'Hor Fun'. So as in Kuala Lumpur, you can start with Kuala Lumpur, just to educate them on how would the place is. Ok, on their next trip, if you educate them well, they will come back to Malaysia, (and) then they can start going to Penang as well..."

The second theme identified was tourism gastronomic product. A few informants recommended that Malaysian food ingredients be packaged as souvenirs at the country's airports for the tourists to experience cooking Malaysian food in their home countries. This is to add value to their food experience in Malaysia by extending it to their homes. For example, one of respondents stated that:

"... Probably you can package in the 'mengkuang' (one of the Pandanus species) basket of food ingredients to take home as souvenir which can be sold at the airport and they might like to try something.... I've already ate this particular food but how to cook it (without the ingredients) and at the airport before departing, at least I have a souvenir pack of 'rendang' ingredients or spices, I have 'masak merah' paste, I have this Chinese black pepper, so I can buy one of these packets to bring home..."

Finally, the last theme originated from the data was food activities. Travel packages were proposed to add food tourism as a part of the activities for tourists who are interested to explore the local cuisine. This was suggested as the starting point in educating international tourists regarding the food destinations in Malaysia. On the other side of the coin, another informant recommended that MTPB develop a calendar year to particularly promote the different food festivals and activities

throughout the country. For example, each month in a year will be assigned to promote a certain kind of food. This would enable international tourists as well as domestic tourists to gain knowledge about the culture or the meaning behind Malaysian food. The quotes extracted from the informants' conversation are presented below:

"... but then if they really look into the whole package, I think it's worthwhile because when we talk about tourism there may be like the travel package ah... and those kind of things. They go to the jungle, so we can still promote our own food like maybe the native's food in Malaysia. They never (have) been introduced to all over the world! When you go to Borneo (Sabah and Sarawak), you can go there, eat there, have their food, I think they have that but not really well known. Probably they need to develop this one, the food tourism."

"In my point of view we need to do a lot of activities, the whole calendar of the year, 12 months. Because only 'Ramadhan', people know our activity, a lot of food activity. But if January, February and other months, we (should) have food tourism activities, hawker food and everything that could create people awareness like this month we have to go to Penang. So we need to do all these and people can recognise that we have this we have that."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Formerly, food was considered as one of the determinants of a destination's image in attracting potential tourists (Yau & Chan, 1990; Rittichainuwat *et al.*, 2001; Govers *et al.*, 2007). However, food is becoming a crucial determinant that contributes to the growth in tourism at present, and this is particularly due to the rising interest among culinary tourists (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2006; Okumus *et al.*, 2007). In due course, research focusing on food and tourism is on the rise. Researchers argued that food can be a flamboyant image for tourists to retain information of a particular destination, and through eating local food tourists can get to experience a truly authentic cultural tradition and have a longer lasting memory on a particular destination (Okumus *et al.*, 2007). Hence, images that meet tourists' expectations will definitely satisfy them, and this will in turn repeat visitation and the likelihood of recommending it to their friends and family will also increase (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Lee *et al.*, 2007; González *et al.*, 2007).

Traditional cuisine and gracious hospitality are the strengths and positive encounters that Malaysians possess. This study was undertaken due to the rise of food consumption in destinations. Through qualitative approach using focus group interview on the image of Malaysian gastronomy, the definitions, characteristics and types of the food that best illustrate Malaysian food were discussed. In more specific, there are five definitions of Malaysian food, and these include diverse

sensory experience, cultural food, hot and spicy, binding grounds and meeting of cultures. Meanwhile, there are eight characteristics of Malaysian gastronomy identified; tinged human senses, easy access, unique stylish, flavourful, alfresco dining atmosphere, culinary adventure and sample of cultures. Although the findings are not generalizable, this study has presented a preliminary groundwork to develop an understanding of what people attached to Malaysian food, in succession to forming an image to be capitalized as a source to market Malaysia.

The findings in this study are definitely useful and crucial to hoteliers and MTPB in gearing up their strategies to promote Malaysia to a higher ground in the food tourism niche market. The multicultural society in this country has contributed to the richness and diversity of Malaysian food; for this reason, the government should aggressively market food tourism as a product that can lure foreign visitors. Different tastes and flavours can be found from Perlis to Johor, as well as Sabah and Sarawak.

Besides, the image attributes identified may provide a more informed and systematic basis for marketing and positioning strategies to managers, marketers in the hospitality and tourism industry on Malaysian gastronomy. Additionally, this study may also assist food marketers in developing a comprehensive strategic marketing plan that focuses on targeting food tourists. Ultimately, this study can serve as a basis for further research on the brand image of Malaysian

food. Future studies could test the items retrieved from the present research by using a quantitative method. However, there are also limitations which should be highlighted here. The findings could not be generalized as they were merely the judgments of 31 informants who had participated in the focus group interviews for the present research purpose.

Finally, it is expected that this study will enrich the body of knowledge in the hospitality and tourism industry, since there have been very few studies reported in this area, particularly in Malaysia. Therefore, the study was carried out to fill in the gap in the food tourism literature, particularly in the Malaysian context.

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