

## Exploring Culinary as a Tourist Attraction in Takengon, Central Aceh

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**ABSTRACT:** The objective of this research is to explore and analyze how the tourists' perception of cuisine in Takengon. Using descriptive qualitative study and taking the data through observation and interviews to conduct the research, it was found that central Aceh has a variety of food and drinks which had become a potential attraction for tourists to visit. A variety of coffees, Masam jing, Gutel, Cecah, Pengat, and Lepat have contributed to the increasing number of tourists visiting Takengon since the culinary become one of their reasons to come. Moreover, such perceptions are expected to be useful for food and drink development and innovation in Gayo high land.

**Keywords:** *culinary, tourism, Takengon, perception*

### INTRODUCTION

Takengon, one of the tourist areas in Indonesia also known as the capital of Central Aceh Regency, is a scenic and culturally rich area which is located in the highlands of Aceh, Indonesia. It is a hidden gem that offers visitors a unique experience since there is found cool climate, lush landscapes, and beautiful natural attractions. Culinary is one of the region's most notable features with distinctive offerings and it has reflected the diversity and traditions of Gayo as the origin tribe in Takengon.

Nowadays, Takengon has become one of the most popular destinations for tourists who are looking for beautiful views, adventurous experiences, and a taste of authentic Acehnese cuisine. Laut Tawar Lake, Bur telege, Pantan Terong, and many historical places have made this land become an ideal location for those looking to escape the hustle and bustle of city life. Moreover, culinary tourism, especially the kinds of traditional food and drinks, has also become one of the driving forces behind the region's growing popularity since it offers a memorable culinary journey that has increasingly drawn the attention of both local and international tourists. The region's natural beauty and its gastronomic heritage have presented Takengon as an emerging destination for culinary tourism.

Takengon's cuisine plays an important role in shaping its identity and enhancing the increase of tourists. The taste with special recipes passed down through generations can deliver how both the land and the heritage are connected. Gayo coffee with rich flavor is a local specialty that is not only being famous nationally but also internationally. Masang jing, a sour-spicy fish soup, sometimes eggs will give a special and memorable taste, Gutel and lepat are kind of sweet snacks which Gutel comes from rice flour, and lepat is made from sticky rice. Cecah is a kind of spicy sauce that is made from chilly and Tamarillo as the main ingredient. While Pengan is a savory fish with a tangy and sweet taste, the fish is called Depik (laut Tawar lake fish). Since the number of tourist areas and hotels in Takengon has grown, the local culinary landscape has become increasingly important in attracting visitors who seek an authentic, immersive experience that connects them to the region's culture. The increasing culinary tourism in Takengon has also contributed to gaining local pride and creating economic opportunities. New business chances are available like the opportunity to a family-run eateries and local food markets. The cultural and economic benefits of promoting local food as part of the tourism experience are becoming more apparent, making culinary tourism a key driver for the area's development. As Takengon continues to attract both domestic and international visitors, its culinary offerings are expected to play an even greater role in shaping the future of its tourism industry.

Even though the popularity of food tourism in Takengon is massively growing, there is limited research on how specific culinary offerings, such as Gayo cuisine, contribute to the tourism experience in Takengon. Since it is acknowledged that traditional food has become a significant role in attracting tourists, there is little information or research about tourists' perceptions of Gayo cuisine and its influence on their decision to visit Takengon. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze how Gayo cuisine is perceived by tourists, and how these perceptions can be utilized to further promote Takengon as a unique culinary destination.

In particular, this research would explore and analyze how perception of Takengon tourism

toward gayo cuisine, moreover investigating how local food influences tourists' experiences and decisions. By understanding these perceptions, this study seeks to provide valuable insights into the role of culinary offerings in enhancing Takengon's appeal as a tourist destination, contributing to the broader understanding of food tourism in the region.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Wurianto (2008) states that traditional cuisine is a cultural richness that should be explored as a cultural asset. It is not only a reflection of a region's culinary practices but also a profound expression of its cultural identity, history, and values. It embodies the unique customs, agricultural practices, and culinary techniques passed down through generations, representing the collective knowledge and creativity of the community. Every traditional food reflects the local environment, climate, and social practices, and in many cases, it engages with rituals, festivals, and important life events. Recognizing traditional it as a cultural asset means acknowledging its importance in preserving and promoting cultural heritage. In many regions, traditional foods hold significant social and emotional value, often bringing people together in communal settings, strengthening family bonds, and fostering a sense of belonging. This culinary heritage also carries lessons about sustainability and local knowledge, as traditional methods often rely on locally sourced, seasonal ingredients and time-honored cooking techniques that minimize waste and maintain a close relationship with the land.

For this reason, traditional cuisine should be explored, celebrated, and safeguarded, as it is a living artifact that connects the present generation to its past. It is also an asset that can be shared with the world, allowing people from different cultures to experience and appreciate the diversity of human history through food. As cultural tourism grows, traditional cuisine becomes an important means of attracting visitors, providing them with an immersive and authentic experience that fosters cultural understanding and respect. Thus, traditional cuisine is not just about food—it's a cultural asset that enriches the broader understanding of a community's identity and history.

Perception will always contribute to the destination decision in traveling. Lamb et al. (2014) state that perception is the process by which people select, organize, and interpret stimuli into a meaningful and coherent picture. In other words, it refers to the cognitive processes through which individuals select, organize, and interpret sensory information (such as taste and smells) to create a meaningful and coherent understanding of the world around them. In the context of culinary tourism, perception plays a crucial role in how tourists experience and evaluate the food they encounter. For instance, a tourist might select a local dish based on recommendations, organize their expectations based on previous experiences with similar cuisines, and then interpret the taste, presentation, and cultural significance of the dish in a way that shapes their overall impression of the destination. The process of perception allows individuals to turn raw sensory data—such as the taste of food or the ambiance of a restaurant—into a personalized and meaningful experience that contributes to their understanding of the destination’s culinary culture.

MD Zain et al. (2018) state that food is one of the crucial elements that influence intention to visit. As Silkes et al., (2013) added Tangible elements of local and international foods (e.g., taste and ingredients) can contribute to cognitive and affective elements (e.g., emotions and experiences) of the destination image. Dahlan (2015) states that Some of Aceh's traditional foods have become culinary tours. They can be found easily in various places, rice stalls or restaurants, coffee shops, food outlets, and others. As Kim (2017) stated tourists often place considerable emphasis on how they feel at a destination, and how they experience what the destination offers, by carefully selecting that special food that might fulfill a particular personal desire. It can't be denied if they feel satisfied with the food served, they will come and choose the same place for the other tour destination.

## **METHOD**

The method used in this study is a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. Data will be collected through in-depth interviews with tourists who have visited Takengon and local

communities involved in the culinary sector. Participants will be selected using purposive sampling, choosing tourists with direct experience of tasting Gayo cuisine in Takengon, as well as local culinary practitioners such as vendors and traditional food producers. In addition to interviews, the researcher will conduct participatory observations at popular culinary locations in Takengon to observe interactions between tourists and locals, as well as how the cuisine is promoted. The collected data will be examined through thematic analysis to uncover central themes regarding tourists' perceptions, the factors that make the cuisine appealing, and how the local community perceives food as a component of tourism. Research locations in Takengon, Central Aceh, Indonesia. The population of this research is consumers or buyers of Takengon cuisine, the samples to be taken are 20 consumers and 2 owners.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The research found that a diverse and rich culinary heritage has emerged as a key attraction for tourists visiting Aceh, Takengon. Through observation and interviews, it was found that several local dishes and beverages, such as coffee, Masam Jing, Gutel, Cecah, Pengat, and Lepat, have significantly contributed to the region's growing tourism appeal. These traditional foods and drinks are not only cherished by locals but have also caught the attention of tourists, who consider the culinary offerings a primary reason for visiting Takengon.

Among these, Takengon's coffee has become a standout, as the region is known for its high-quality beans that have gained recognition nationally and internationally. Additionally, the variety of Masam Jing (a sour and spicy soup), Gutel (a traditional snack), and other unique dishes offer tourists an authentic taste of the local culture. This diversity in food choices highlights Takengon as an emerging culinary hotspot, with the local cuisine playing a crucial role in the increase of tourist visits to the area.

Culinary tourism is a growing phenomenon in Takengon, where food and drink experiences are central to the destination's appeal. The local cuisine is not just a reflection of the region's cultural identity but has also become a tourism driver, contributing to Takengon's increasing number of visitors. The integration of traditional foods such as Masam Jing, Gutel, Cecah, Pengan, and Lepat into the tourism experience creates an authentic cultural encounter for visitors, which is highly valued in the context of culinary tourism.

Moreover, Takengon's renowned coffee plays a significant role in shaping the area's tourism identity, further solidifying the region as a coffee destination. The growing recognition of Aceh coffee on the international stage offers an opportunity to further market Takengon as a place not only for cultural exploration but also for coffee tourism. For tourists, the experience of tasting these traditional foods and beverages serves as a means to connect with the local culture and gain a deeper understanding of the area's heritage.

The results of the interviews revealed that most tourists perceive Takengon cuisine as a unique and essential part of their travel experience. Many tourists expressed that the distinct taste, especially the blend of spices and the use of local ingredients such as gayo coffee, lepat, Masam jing, Cecah, and Gutel, made the culinary experience unforgettable. The majority of respondents emphasized the authenticity of the dishes, describing them as an essential representation of the cultural identity of Takengon. The use of fresh, local produce also contributed significantly to their positive perceptions. However, some tourists mentioned the need for more accessible information regarding the best places to experience authentic food. While many were introduced to local dishes by tour guides, some felt there was a lack of clear promotional efforts to guide them to specific culinary hotspots in the region.

The findings also pointed to several factors that contribute to the culinary appeal of Takengon. First, the authenticity and tradition of cuisine played a significant role in attracting tourists. Many respondents noted that traditional food provided them with an opportunity to

experience a deeper connection to the local culture and history. Dishes like kopi Gayo (Gayo coffee) were often mentioned as key attractions due to their international reputation for high quality. Second, the role of local hospitality and the experience of dining in traditional settings were highlighted as important factors. Tourists appreciated the opportunity to engage with local vendors and enjoy food in a community-oriented environment, where meals were often served in intimate, family-run eateries or traditional markets.

Additionally, the study emphasizes the potential for Takengon to continue expanding its culinary tourism offerings by preserving and promoting local recipes and culinary traditions. As food plays a key role in the formation of destination image and tourist satisfaction, efforts to enhance the culinary tourism infrastructure, such as food tours, cooking classes, and food festivals, could help attract even more visitors. It is clear that culinary tourism in Takengon not only enhances the region's attractiveness as a tourist destination but also supports the local economy by creating new avenues for local food producers, restaurants, and hospitality businesses.

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that culinary tourism, particularly focused on local food and beverages, is an essential aspect of Takengon's tourism strategy. As the region continues to develop its culinary offerings, it has the potential to become a leading destination for food lovers and cultural explorers alike.

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

Gayo cuisine which is available in Takengon, holds immense potential as a unique tourist attraction. The culinary experiences offer tourists a taste of local culture and tradition, contributing significantly to the tourism experience. However, targeted efforts in promotion, infrastructure, and community engagement are essential to fully realize the potential of Takengon as a culinary destination.

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