



Research Article

Culinary Innovation as A Driver of Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Competitiveness: A Study of Uttarakhand's Hospitality Sector

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Abstract

“Food experiences” capture the local culture of a hospitality destination, adding value and visitors while improving satisfaction and differentiation. This research examines culinary innovation and its impact on tourist satisfaction and destination competitiveness in Uttarakhand, a Himalayan state where multiple tourism types overlap with Garhwali and Kumaoni food traditions. To do this, the study presents an interrelated web of innovative, authentic, and diverse menus, local sourcing, and sustainable culinary practices, destination imaging, and the resulting traveller satisfaction, intent to revisit, and word-of-mouth. Within the tourism context, this paper relies on the already verified, secondary sources of the Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board's Tourist Statistics for Major Tourist Destinations in the Year 2024, and the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India's India Tourism Data Compendium for the Year 2025. Only the quantitative tables and figures will be retained as a pilot analytical illustration, since the author of the working manuscript did not provide the respondent-level data for independent verification. The author incorporates research from the past five years of peer-reviewed literature. This paper argues that culinary innovation in Uttarakhand should be a culturally based, not a surface-level, innovation that incorporates regionally specific foods and culturally based narratives of cooking into safe, aesthetically pleasing, and commercially viable hospitality services. The study offers a practical and context-specific model to stakeholders.

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KEYWORDS: Culinary innovation; tourist satisfaction; destination competitiveness; Uttarakhand; food tourism; hospitality sector; authenticity; sustainable sourcing.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Food has become a central component to the experience of the destination tourist. Earlier destination marketing regarded food as a functioning aspect of travel. However, recent tourism research perceives food as a carrier of memory, identity, place attachment, and symbolic value (Richards, 2021; Stalmirska, 2021; Hurdawaty et al., 2025). In hospitality, food is not just a product, it is not just going from the kitchen to the guest. Through sensory evaluation, tourists rate the service quality, cultural authenticity, hygiene, freshness, creativity and emotional tone of the destination. This transition is especially significant in mountain destinations where foodways are closely interlinked with ecology, seasonality, local crops, medicinal plants, patterns of migration, ritual practices, and community livelihood.

The relationship can be examined distinctly in Uttarakhand. The state attracts a wide variety of tourists. Pilgrimage tourists passing through Haridwar, Rishikesh, Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri and Yamunotri. Leisure tourists visiting Nainital, Mussoorie, Almora, Ranikhet, Kausani and other hill towns. Wellness tourists looking for yoga, Ayurveda, meditation and riverside retreats. Adventure and eco-tourists visiting trekking, rafting, wildlife and homestay circuits. And business tourists linked to Dehradun, Haldwani, Udham Singh Nagar and upcoming urban nodes. The official destination statistics reveal the extent of the system. According to Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board (2025), in 2024, total recorded visits to the destination were 59,550,277 which include 59,373,869 domestic visitors and 176,408 foreign visitors. This kind of volume creates both an opportunity and a challenge: destinations need to differentiate the visitor experience while protecting fragile ecological and cultural assets.

Innovation in food can help in this differentiation to the extent that it is based on the local food culture and not the uncritical replica of the standard restaurant menu. The hospitality sector has a rich treasure of food resources available in Uttarakhand. It includes Mandua or finger millet, Jhangora or barnyard millet, Bhatt or black soybean, Gahat or horse gram, local rajma, Pahadi salts, Churkani, Dubke, Aloo ke Gutke, Kafuli, Chainsoo, Bhang ki Chutney, Buransh based drinks, Arsa, Singori, Bal Mithai and seasonal greens, herbs. Fermented pickles and traditional slow-cooking techniques are common in Uttarakhand. If modern tourists are served the same consistent quality with safe food preparation and clear communication, then sustainability, wellness, storytelling, and authenticity appeal to food.

However, the visual plating and novelty ingredients will not suffice to elevate a destination's culinary offerings. The main issue is how local food becomes an integrated part of a destination value chain. Innovation should link farmers, women self-help groups, food processors, chefs, hotels, cafes, homestays, tourism boards, training institutions, digital platforms, local communities. According to Richards (2021), Dhillon & Dhillon (2025) and Ramos & Pinto (2024), the resource-based view of culinary tourism is that food heritage becomes an asset for the destination only when it is able to organize, communicate, protect and commercialize it in a responsible manner.

1.1 Background of the Study

Research on food tourism indicates that tourists are searching for experiences that connect them with the culture and everyday life in the host destination (Richards, 2021; Stalmirska, 2021; Gupta & Sharma, 2024). This connection is offered by local food consumption, which is concrete, sensory and shareable. Food is unlike many destination attributes, which can be consumed repeatedly on a trip, talked about with companions, photographed and reviewed online, and remembered after the trip. The word food is like a destination touchpoint which works before travel under promotional images during travel through consumption and service interaction after travel with memory and word-of-mouth.

Mountain destinations food also responds to the problem of commodified similarity. Hotels at different hill stations may provide similar rooms, similar sightseeing packages and similar continental or pan-Indian menu. A curated local food experience can disrupt this sameness. A hotel, homestay, cafe or resort can indicate that a guest is staying not in just any hill destination, but a specific cultural landscape. Food-related authenticity is being associated with memorable tourism experiences and intention to revisit (Chen et al., 2023; Hurdawaty et al., 2025).

The culinary novelty is also pertinent due to Uttarakhand's tourism policy environment. The state's official tourism website maintains market research and tourist statistics. Furthermore, the Ministry of Tourism compiles the state-wise and annual tourism data (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India 2025; Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board 2025). As a result of such administrative scrutiny of destination development and analytics, a link between hospitality innovation and evidence-based tourism planning can be established. Still, the food-related dimension is often less systematically measured than accommodation capacity, arrivals, transport or infrastructure. By proposing a structured model that links cooking creativity with satisfaction and competitiveness, this paper answers that gap.

1.2 Statement of the Research Problem

Uttarakhand has strong culinary assets, but the assets are not converted uniformly into destination competitiveness. Local dishes in hotels and restaurants are often seen as a menu item and lack a true culinary experience. Sometimes, seasonal logic is lacking in the presentation of traditional food that does not come with explanations, source transparency, or standardized taste and safety. Some hospitality operators stick to mostly generic North Indian, Chinese, continental and fast-food menus because they are considered safer commercial options. Thus, local cuisine may remain unutilized, despite the rising interest by tourists in authentic, healthy, and local-rooted experiences. Lack of absence of regional food is not the problem; the challenge lies in not having a systematic innovation process. A destination may have authentic ingredients and recipes, but includes mis-presentation, inconsistent preparation, weak communication and disconnection from service design will still fail to satisfy. Just like that, a destination could put together some very attractive culinary products, but competitiveness could fail to be generated if the local producers do not benefit,

or if menus ignore seasonality or if digital reputation is not appropriately managed. The study therefore asks how we can conceptualize, measure and strategically use the idea of culinary innovation in Uttarakhand's hotel industry.

1.3 Significance of the Study

There are four reasons why the study is important. To begin with, it is understood that local food must be brought into the analytical vocabulary of destination competitiveness, and not be taken as a cultural footnote. According to Cronje & du Plessis (2020), Dwyer (2022), Mior Shariffuddin et al. (2023), and Xia et al. (2024), recent reviews of destination competitiveness found that destinations need distinctive resources, demand-side value, stakeholder coordination, management capability and performance indicators with sustainability orientation. The link between these dimensions is culinary innovation, because local food is an inherited cultural resource, restaurants and food trails are created resources, supply chains are supporting conditions, training and branding are management practices, sustainability is a situational requirement, and tourist preference represents demand-side conditions.

Additionally, the link between tourist satisfaction and the operational decisions of hospitality providers. Satisfaction is shaped by sensory quality, perceived authenticity, hygiene, value, service interaction, and post-consumption evaluation in food and restaurant contexts (Kala & Barthwal, 2020; Kaushal & Yadav, 2021; Gupta & Sharma, 2024; Hurdawaty et al., 2025). If a dish is tasty, explained, safe, fresh, reasonably priced, and linked to the narrative of the destination, a tourist who expects it to be authentic may be satisfied. On the contrary, a well-prepared local dish can enhance visitor satisfaction and image.

The study has relevance to present policies. Culinary creativity can drive local sourcing, support women-head food enterprises, popularise millets, diversify homestay, low-food-mile procurement, community festival, destination branding, etc. It also bridges tourism development and improving the livelihood of local communities. Ultimately, this study's contribution to the literature involves the adaptation of food tourism and destination competitiveness concepts to a Himalayan hospitality context where the linkages with ecology, pilgrimage, wellness and cultural identity are strong.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Food Tourism, Local Food, and Tourist Experience

Food tourism is when travel experiences related to local food, culinary culture, beverage, food production sites, markets, festivals, cooking practices, and food stories form a meaningful part of the visit to the destination (Richards, 2021; Stalmirska, 2021; Gupta & Sharma, 2024). It is not necessary for every tourist to travel just for food. Whether for pilgrimage, wellness, leisure or adventure, tourists can derive great satisfaction from food as well. This distinction is significant for Uttarakhand as the state earns its livelihood not only through culinary tourism. Nonetheless, food can enhance the principal travel purpose of comfort, novelty, cultural learning, and memory.

Food is a supporting consumer experience and the peak tourist experience (Richards, 2021; Gupta and Sharma, 2024). A meal can just help you travel by providing you with sustenance or it can become the memorable meal around which the trip revolves. In a similar way, Hurdawaty et al. (2025) show that local food consumption is shaped by sensory appeal, cultural experience, health concern, interpersonal relation and prestige in modern travel, we are witnessing some evolution, as guests support local flavors. This is evident in recent behavior, where guests seek local flavor offerings, photograph the special dish, question it about the ingredients, compare with other destinations, and use food as evidence of its existence. There are many examples, including the tour guides of Argentina and Mexico and others who offer warriors a local flavor.

According to Gupta and Sharma (2024) and Kar et al. (2024), the main factors influencing tourist consumption behaviour in relation to food include cultural and religious influence, socio-demographic, food-related personality, previous exposure, and motivational factor. Uttarakhand, this means food innovation must be secular. Budget was a higher priority to pilgrim tourists than indiscriminate vegetarianisation. Wellness tourists might look for nutrition, natural ingredients, herbal drinks and light meals. Tourists aspiring for adventure may value energy-rich local food and portable nibbles. Leisure tourists may respond to taste, presentation, ambiance of cafe and shareable dishes. Business tourists may give preference to reliability, hygiene, and quick menu options. One identical menu cannot meet these different expectations.

2.2 Culinary Authenticity and Creative Adaptation

The idea of authenticity comes up often in food tourism because food is typically viewed as a sign of cultural legitimacy. According to Gupta and Sharma (2024), food can entice tourists with promises of cultural variance, though it can also generate hesitation in visitors who may have concerns about hygiene, taste, and diet. Authenticity then requires to be mediated through service design. Once restaurants explain ingredients, provide tasting portions, inform on dietary issues and maintain hygiene, tourists may appreciate traditional food more, when able to adapt spice or texture without removing cultural meaning.

Culinary innovation can be understood as the creative adaptation of food heritage to present day hospitality requirements. The menu includes the creation of a menu, plating, storytelling, sourcing locally. Use of traditional ingredients in new formats. Pairing of dishes with the story of the destination (e.g. an outstation). Nutri-sensitive preparation. Digital communication. Experiential formats like cooking demo or food trail. Novelty and authenticity are not opposites. In fact, it can safeguard authenticity by making local food comprehensible, appealing, and economically viable for new visitor segments (Richards, 2021; Stalmirska, 2021; Ramos & Pinto, 2024).

Balancing is important in Uttarakhand. Mandua roti, Bhatt ki Churkani, Gahat, Jhangora kheer, Kafuli, Chainsoo, Aloo ke Gutke, local chutneys, and Buransh beverages are meaningful because they are related to altitude, climate, agriculture, household labor, ritual practices, and regional taste. If these dishes are merely mimicked, they will become decorative

labels. They become destination assets when interpreted through fine culinary design. Chefs who have the correct training, documentation of the recipe accurately, sensory standardization, procurement links, menu engineering, and crew who can tell stories of the food realistically without glorifying poverty or freezing the culture as an exhibit in a museum.

2.3 Tourist Satisfaction, Destination Image, and Loyalty

Tourist satisfaction is generally conceived as an evaluation that visitors perform after the consumption of the food, service, value, hygiene, and the emotional meaning (Kala & Barthwal, 2020; Kaushal & Yadav, 2021; Hurdawaty et al., 2025). According to Gupta and Sharma (2024) and Hurdawaty et al. (2025), in hospitality research, satisfaction has a strong relationship with sensory quality, perceived authenticity, service interaction, and future behavioural intention.

Satisfaction from food contains multiple dimensions. Factors influencing eating out experience comprise taste, freshness, presentation, portion size, price fairness, hygiene, staff behaviour, ambience, waiting time, menu variety, cultural meaning and emotional connection. Just because something is a local dish does not mean it will be good if it is served cold, poorly explained, too pricey, or of variable quality.

Destination image refers to the cognitive and affective perceptions tourists have of a destination. It includes what visitors think that the destination is offering and how they feel. Meals can enhance both parts of that. A traveller may mentally connect Uttarakhand with mountain grain, local herb, satvik food, riverside cafes, organic homestays, and traditional sweets. These foods may bring about comfort, purity, health, adventure, family memory, or spiritual atmosphere to the tourist. Scholarly examination on food involvement shows that culinary engagement could enhance place attachment and destination loyalty (Chen et al., 2023).

According to recent studies, food authenticity and social media exposure can shape revisit intention through memorable culinary tourism experience and destination image (Hurdawaty et al., 2025). The Indian context was studied for destination food image and culinary destination competitiveness along with the effect of local food, social media, food culture, and advertising on food image and evaluation of destination (Kar, 2024; Dhillon & Dhillon, 2025). The implications of these findings for Uttarakhand Destination choice are increasingly motivated by online reviews, short-form videos on Insta Reels, café décor, food decor photographs, travel influencers, and peer recommendations. Consequently, a destination's digital competitiveness includes culinary innovation.

2.4 Destination Competitiveness and Culinary Resources

The competitive edge of a destination is measured by its ability to produce and package such products that sustain both demand from visitors as well as enjoy a positive impact on the well-being of residents and resources. The idea encompasses more than just arriving quantities. A destination can have a high volume of people but not be competitive if it has low visitor satisfaction, visitor spending concentrated outside of the local community, high environmental stress, or undifferentiated

products. Sustained Value Creation is Essential for Competitiveness

Food influences competitiveness with resource differentiation; service diversification; price-value perception; local supply chains and brand identity; and repeatable experiences. A culinary heritage may be regarded as a unique resource; but it becomes competitive when embedded in destination systems: menu standards; chef training; market linkages; food safety; branding; festivals; digital visibility; product packaging; policy support. The studies that are undertaken on culinary tourism strategy often recommend some indicators. These indicators include cultural heritage, food quality, infrastructure, marketing, collaboration, and sustainability (Richards, 2021; Dhillon & Dhillon, 2025; Ramos & Pinto, 2024).

Right now, Uttarakhand is competitive because of its religion, nature, health and adventure assets. You can add untried culinary innovation along-with defined strengths. For example, safe regional vegetarian menus and local grain-based meals can be on Char Dham routes. Evidence-informed nutrition communication can use mountain herbs, millets, and fermented foods for wellness retreats. Homestays can offer homecooked food stories and farm-linked meals. Wildlife and eco-tourism destinations can showcase local sales menus. Urban cafes in Dehradun, Haldwani, Nainital, Rishikesh and Mussoorie can use regional produce and ingredients for younger visitors without losing their essence.

2.5 Sustainability, Local Sourcing, and Mountain Food Systems

Sustainable culinary innovation in Himalayan regions is necessary as food consumption is interlinked with the use of water, generation of waste, transporting, agricultural livelihood and cultural continuity. Mountain destinations are impacted by seasonality, disruption of roads, accumulation of waste, and high dependency on supplies. Purchasing local produce can help shorten food miles, bolster farmers and create more resilient menus. Nonetheless, local sourcing has to be organized carefully. There is a constant need for quantity, safety, price predictability, and delivery schedules from hoteliers. Similarly, small producers seek fair purchasing terms, aggregation, processing, and training.

The re-introduction of Mandua, Jhangora, and other traditional grains has tourism relevance as they can be marketed around nutrition, climate resilience, local identities, and wellness. Destination marketing should not make oversimplified claims. Due diligence would ensure truthful descriptions on menus regarding allergens, cooking processes and origins. The concept of sustainability in the kitchen also includes reducing waste, seasonal menus, composting and reusable packaging. Mountain tourism needs ecological discipline for destination competitiveness.

Ensuring food safety is just as important. Local cuisine may appeal to tourists but they may have concerns about hygiene and foreign ingredients. Hospitality operators need standards related to procuring, storing, preparing, serving and staff hygiene. Training centers in Haldwani, Dehradun and other places can develop modules on mountain cuisine, food safety, recipe documentation, plating and garnish, nutrition, cost

control and customer communication. Training enhances kitchen efficiency through engaging talent in effective processes.

2.6 Research Gap

According to recent researchers, it has been established that food tourism outcome such as satisfaction, destination image, place attachment, and loyalty influences (Richards, 2021; Chen et al., 2023; Gupta and Sharma, 2024; Hurdawaty et al., 2025). Studies on destination competitiveness have also identified resources, management, supporting factors, demand conditions, resident well-being, and market performance as key factors (Cronje and du Plessis, 2020; Dwyer, 2022; Mior Shariffuddin et al., 2023; Xia et al., 2024). Yet, there are three gaps related to Uttarakhand. The local food is very often discussed culturally but less modeling being done around its measurable driver of destination competitiveness. Secondly, there is a common tendency to interweave various types of tourism research in the state, such as pilgrimage, nature, wellness or infrastructure, while food gets the least analytical attention. The limited integration of culinary authenticity with innovation, sustainability, satisfaction, destination image and behavioural intention in one state-specific hospitality framework.

The study fills these gaps by developing and demonstrating an analytical model for the hospitality industry of Uttarakhand. Local food is not an ornament in the model. The paper assesses culinary innovation as a destination capability which needs to be measured in terms of authenticity, menu diversity, presentation, local sourcing, storytelling, health orientation and service design. It also connects these aspects with satisfaction, image of the destination, competitiveness, intention to return, and word-of-mouth communication.

3. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

3.1 Stimulus-Organism-Response Framework

The stimulus-organism-response framework can elucidate the dynamics of the culinary innovation. Under this model, environment and service stimuli affect internal appraisals and feelings, which trigger the behavioural responses (Kar et al., 2024; Hurdawaty et al., 2025). Regional ingredients, creative menu, sensual appeal, cultural storytelling, staff explanation, ambience, hygiene cues, local sourcing claims, digital food portrayal are some culinary stimuli in Uttarakhand's hospitality. The stage of the organism encompasses perceived authenticity, satisfaction, trust, destination image, and emotions. The response stage includes the visitor's intention to revisit, recommend, willing to pay, post-review, and advocacy for destination.

This method enables us to advance beyond a straightforward claim of cause and effect, which suggests that local food makes us happy. Instead, culinary choices are framed as cues which tourists process through, among others, expectation, culture, past experience, healthiness, and value. The same local dish

may surprise one tourist, puzzle another, and fail to impress a third if the service context weak. As a result, the culinary innovation needs to be interpreted as a designed set of stimuli that enhances the probabilities of positive psychological and behavioral outcomes.

3.2 Destination Competitiveness Theory

The theory of destination competitiveness positions culinary innovation within a wider tourism system. According to Cronje and du Plessis (2020), core resources, supporting factors, destination management, policy, planning and sustainability are important aspects to pay attention to. Competitiveness is the inherited resources, created resources, supporting factors, destination management, demand conditions (D1-D3), and market performance. Therefore, Mior Shariffuddin et al. (2023) and Xia et al. (2024). There are numerous aspects of culinary innovation. Food customs and local ingredients are inherited resources. Resources produced embodies restaurants, food track, festivals, branded-menu's, culinary events etc. There are transport, cold chains, training establishments and digital platforms. Creating offers is part of destination management through product development.

The significance of this framework for Uttarakhand lies in its connection between micro-level hospitality decisions and macro-level destination outcomes. An eatery may choose to feature a regional breakfast; a homestay may choose to explain household recipes or a cafe may choose to source local grains. All these decisions can contribute to destination-level differentiation only when they pile-up across the ecosystem. You don't create competitiveness with isolated menu items. It is forged through consistent, trustworthy, and familiar culinary experiences across different destinations and circuits.

3.3 Conceptual Model and Research Hypotheses

The proposed model posits culinary creativity as the main driver. It utilizes five dimensions to achieve its goal - use of local ingredients; authenticity and storytelling; menu diversity; presentation, sensory appeal, and more; and sustainable local sourcing. The mediating evaluative outcomes include tourist satisfaction and destination image. Destination competitiveness pertains to a destination-level perception; it reflects differentiation, quality, cultural distinctiveness, sustainability, and service value. Revisit intention and WOM are regarded as behavioral consequence.

The analytical model is guided by the following hypotheses: H1 culinary innovation positively influences tourist satisfaction. The Culinary Innovation Enhances Destination Image Tourist satisfaction affects destination competitiveness positively. The image of the destination positively affected how it is perceived as competitive. Destination quality affects revisit and word of mouth. Tourist satisfaction varies among different categories based on tourists' purposes like leisure, pilgrimage, wellness, adventure or eco-tourism, and business travel.

Conceptual Model of Culinary Innovation and Destination Competitiveness

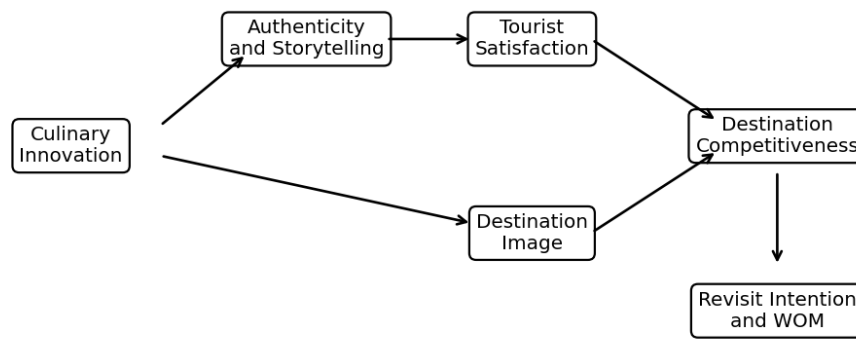


Figure 1: Conceptual model of culinary innovation and destination competitiveness.

4. Research Objectives and Questions

4.1 Research Objectives

1. To examine the role of culinary innovation in shaping tourist satisfaction in Uttarakhand's hospitality sector.
2. To analyze whether authenticity, menu diversity, presentation, storytelling, and local sourcing influence perceived destination competitiveness.
3. To assess the relationship among tourist satisfaction, destination image, revisit intention, and word-of-mouth recommendation.
4. To propose managerial and policy measures for hospitality operators, training institutions, tourism planners, and local food enterprises.
5. To develop a context-specific model that can be tested with verified field data across multiple tourism circuits of Uttarakhand.

4.2 Research Questions

RQ1: How does culinary innovation influence tourist satisfaction in Uttarakhand's hospitality sector?

RQ2: Which culinary experience factors are most relevant for strengthening destination image and competitiveness?

RQ3: How do satisfaction and destination image contribute to revisit intention and positive word-of-mouth?

RQ4: What practical interventions can help hospitality operators convert regional cuisine into a sustainable destination asset?

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Data Sources and Research Design

The research corresponds to a meta-analysis based on proven secondary data from reviewed literature and proposed non-verified pilot analytical structure. According to the verified Secondary sources, namely, Tourist Statistics of Major Tourist Destinations Year 2024, Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board, and India Tourism Data Compendium 2025, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, only will be used for

ascertaining the scale, composition and institutional setting of the Tourism at Uttarakhand and India. The literature base is limited to academic papers and official publications of 2020-2025, thus ensuring the manuscript is reflective of current scholarship in culinary tourism, destination image, tourist satisfaction, destination competitiveness, hospitality experience and survey-based tourism analytics.

The manuscript did not come with a primary dataset at the respondent level. Consequently, the numerical tables and figures retained in Section 6 are expressly regarded as a pilot analytical illustration derived from the working manuscript's survey structure. These show how reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, correlation regression, ANOVA, and hypothesis testing can be reported after collecting verified field responses. Until the actual questionnaire is administered to actual tourists and professionals in the hospitality field, results should not be taken as final evidence from the survey. Moreover, an independent check must be performed on sampling, missing values, outliers, reliability, validity and ethics.

The statement of data sources is: (a) official tourism context from Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board (2025) and Ministry of Tourism, Government of India (2025); (b) analytical variables, pilot frequencies, means, correlations, regression coefficients and figures from working manuscript as unverified pilot structure; and (c) all academic support citations in the revised manuscript confined to 2020-2025 verified sources.

5.2 Study Area

The focused Uttarakhand study area will include the prominent tourism nodes of Nainital, Haldwani, Dehradun, Rishikesh, Haridwar, Mussoorie, Almora, and the Jim Corbett area. These locations exhibit a diversity of tourism functions. Merging pilgrims, spirituality, wellness and river-based tourism uses Haridwar and Rishikesh. Nainital, Mussoorie, Almora and surrounding hill destinations exemplify leisure and mountain tourism. Dehradun and Haldwani are urban gateways, education business hubs, and service centers. The Corbett area is known

for eco-tourism. The diversity of Uttarakhand makes it ideal to study whether culinary innovation can cross-cut varied visitor motivation.

Food geography of the state is no less. The food traditions of Garhwal and Kumaon overlap but also differ. These differences and similarities are due to altitude, the nature of crops, household food practices, religious injunctions, and season-wise availability. Hospitality industry consists of luxury hotels, mid-scale hotels, budget hotels, dhaba, cafes, food joints in pilgrim sites, wellness resorts, homestays, community-based lodgings and food carts. This variety calls for flexible model suitable for formal and informal hospitality enterprise.

5.3 Population, Sampling, and Respondent Categories

A full empirical study would target domestic and international tourists indulging in food at hospitality establishments in Uttarakhand, along with hospitality professionals such as hotel managers, chefs, food and beverage supervisors, homestay owners, café operators, and tourism planners. The recommendation is a multi-stage sampling. The selection of tourism nodes representing pilgrimage, wellness, leisure, adventure, eco-tourism, and business segments. Hospitality units should be chosen from every category. For the third survey of tourists a systematic or stratified intercept approach is suggested for hotels, homestays, restaurants, cafes, transit points and tourist attractions.

The working paper's pilot analytical structure pertains to 300 tourists and 50 hospitality respondents, though the respondent-level survey file was not made available. Thus, the figures are kept as an embodiment of the planned empirical design rather than as independently verified field evidence. A final field study pertaining to the tourist segment will need to cover a number of variables. These should include gender, age group, first-time/repeat visitor, income/expenditure band, trip purpose, and travel party type. In addition, there should also be place of

food consumption. The hospitality professionals' segment needs to document menu practices, sourcing patterns, innovation barriers, training needs and perceptions of tourist demand. The sample should be collected across the seasons since Uttarakhand tourism flows vary during summer holidays, monsoon, winter, pilgrimage seasons and long weekends.

5.4 Measurement of Variables

A questionnaire will make use of a five-point scale ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement. The presence of local ingredients, presentation, menu variety, authenticity, storytelling, evenly healthy preparation, local sourcing, sustainability, and staff explanation can measure culinary innovation. The satisfied tourists were evaluated on taste, hygiene, value for money, service quality, emotional enjoyment and overall food experience. The overall impression of a destination and its ability to fulfil a tourists' wants will be referred to as destination image. A destination's competitiveness can be gauged through its differentiation, quality, reputation, value and competitiveness with other hill destinations. Behavioral intention can be measured through intention to revisit, to recommend, to leave an online review, and to try more local dishes.

Items for the new scale were generated by adapting items from validated scales in food tourism and destination image research, and obtaining expert review from experts in the area of tourism, chefs, hospitality managers, and local food practitioners. To ascertain that the instrument is clear and that translation (if the Hindi version is used) is accurate. Also to assess the time taken for completion, whether the respondent understands the local name of the food item. Through Cronbach's alpha, reliability can be examined whereas exploratory factor analysis or confirmatory factor analysis can be used to assess the construct validity depending on sample size and research design (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 1: Constructs and Operational Indicators

Construct	Indicative Dimensions	Expected Outcome
Culinary innovation	Local ingredients, menu creativity, presentation, storytelling, local sourcing, healthy preparation	Distinctive and meaningful food experience
Tourist satisfaction	Taste, hygiene, value, service, ambience, emotional enjoyment	Positive post-consumption evaluation
Destination image	Cultural uniqueness, wellness association, food reputation, sustainability perception	Favorable cognitive and affective image
Destination competitiveness	Differentiation, quality, reputation, destination value, service integration	Stronger market positioning
Behavioral intention	Revisit intention, recommendation, review posting, willingness to try local cuisine	Loyalty and word-of-mouth

5.5 Analytical Strategy

The recommended analysis starts with screening the data, treating the missing values, examining the outliers, and profiling descriptively. Reliability assessment must be conducted to each multi-item construct. We will perform correlation analysis to assess the direction and strength of the relationship between culinary innovation, satisfaction, destination image, competitiveness, and revisit intention. Through multiple regression, it is possible to estimate the predictive contribution of culinary innovation and destination

image on satisfaction and competitiveness. ANOVA can help determine if satisfaction differs by tourist group. Provided that The sample size is adequate and the measurement validates; a test of the proposed mediation model can be done more rigorously using structural equation modelling. In the empirical section of any journal submission, report the 'sources of instruments' used, the 'sample frame', 'sampling logic', 'response rate and ethics', 'endorse reliability coefficients', 'provide validity evidence', 'report the model fit if using SEM', 'report confidence intervals', 'report effect sizes' and 'report limitations' (Hair et al., 2021). The present manuscript

illustrates this reporting format, while making a careful distinction between verified official secondary data and unverified pilot analytical outputs. To meet Scopus-level expectations for transparency of the research, this distinction is necessary.

6. RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The statistics in section 6 will be taken from the pilot analytical structure contained in the working manuscript of this study. Results are interpreted as methodological demonstration due to the non-supply of raw respondent-level primary data. The background information provided in this report is based on official tourism statistics (2025) published by the Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board and Ministry of Tourism, Government of India.

6.1 Respondent Profile

The pilot profile shows a leisure and pilgrimage tourist sample mainly composed of adults with a significant percentage of repeaters. As the raw survey file was not provided, these figures

are not considered independently verified respondent data. They are employed to illustrate the structure of respondent profiling to be employed in the final field study. It is analytically useful to study repeat visitors as the same local food may not be rated the same way by a first-time visitor and one who has had a prior visit. They may be more inclined to sample regional fare, more cognizant of authenticity, and better able to compare current service quality to past experiences.

Separate profiles are ideal for purpose-wise. Leisure tourists formed the largest component, followed by pilgrimage tourists, wellness tourists, adventure or eco-tourists and business tourists. Culinary innovation may mean different things to different groups. Pilgrimage tourists may value purity, cheapness and trust. Leisure tourists may value ambience and taste. Wellness tourists may value nutrition and authenticity of herbs used. Adventure tourists may value energy, portability and uniqueness. Business tourists may value speed of service and reliability.

Table 2: Tourist Profile in the Pilot Analytical Structure

Profile Variable	Frequency	Percent
Gender: Male	166	55.3
Gender: Female	131	43.7
Age: 18-25 years	63	21.0
Age: 26-35 years	92	30.7
Age: 36-45 years	88	29.3
First-time visitors	183	61.0
Repeat visitors	117	39.0
Leisure tourists	99	33.0
Pilgrimage tourists	83	27.7
Adventure/Eco tourists	43	14.3
Wellness tourists	47	15.7
Business tourists	28	9.3

Tourist Profile by Purpose of Visit

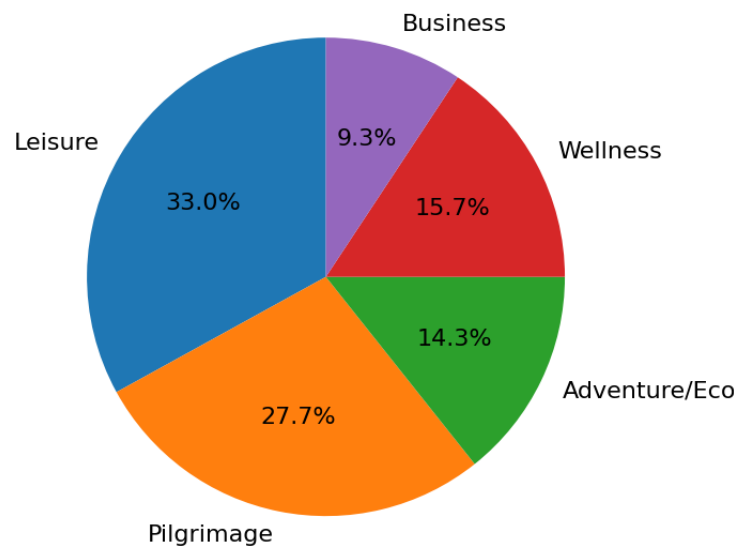


Figure 2: Tourist profile by purpose of visit.

6.2 Reliability and Descriptive Statistics

In the pilot structure, culinary innovation scale yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.897. With a score this high, there is a high degree of internal consistency among the measure for traditional ingredients, menu diversity, presentation, and culinary indicators of storytelling, authenticity, and healthy local sourcing. If this scale is used with a real respondent group, it is reasonable to believe that this construct can be measured. In other studies, the reliability of the scale should be evaluated for the different language versions of the survey and different groups of tourists.

With the exception of culinary innovation, which received a mean below the acceptable limit, the other three means were acceptable to good. This indicates to us, tourists have a conception of the value some destinations offer, and improvements to culinary innovation are a priority. Given the findings, hospitality managers should avoid the belief that the presence of local food is sufficient to drive satisfaction. The improvement of local food offerings should focus their design, consistency, and visibility combined with the culinary story of the destination.

Table 3: Reliability and Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Culinary innovation	3.290	1.027	Moderately positive perception
Tourist satisfaction	3.560	0.777	Positive satisfaction level
Destination competitiveness	3.816	0.860	Strong destination evaluation
Revisit intention	3.534	0.732	Positive behavioral tendency
Culinary innovation scale reliability	Alpha = 0.897	-	Acceptable internal consistency



Figure 3: Tourist satisfaction by culinary experience factors.

6.3 Correlation Analysis

According to the correlation matrix, positive relationships exist between culinary innovation, tourist satisfaction, destination competitiveness, and the intention to return. The connection of culinary innovation to tourist satisfaction and destination competitiveness indicates that food-related innovation may act as a prominent experiential cue. Tourist satisfaction relates positively to the intention to return and aligns with satisfaction-loyalty theory and relevant food tourism research (Kala & Barthwal, 2020; Chen et al., 2023; Hurdaway et al., 2025).

These correlations represent a concern as well. In the final empirical study, if multiple regression is applied, the author should discuss multicollinearity. If the constructs of the study are close to one another, the author should use a confirmatory factor analysis to demonstrate discriminant validity. For example, if food is the main component of the destination experience, tourists could perceive culinary innovation and destination competitiveness as the same concept. For this reason, future studies should aim at an adequate sample size to validate the measurement model prior to examining the conceptual relationships.

Table 4. Correlation Matrix of Key Constructs

Variable	Culinary Innovation	Tourist Satisfaction	Destination Competitiveness	Revisit Intention
Culinary innovation	1.000	0.937	0.922	0.781
Tourist satisfaction	0.937	1.000	0.896	0.803
Destination competitiveness	0.922	0.896	1.000	0.782
Revisit intention	0.781	0.803	0.782	1.000

6.4 Regression Analysis

This section addresses the development of an initial regression model to outline the relationship between various variables, including tourist satisfaction, culinary innovation, and destination competitiveness. The regression model indicates an excellent fit, with an R-squared value of 88.5% and an adjusted R-squared of 88.4%. After controlling for destination competitiveness, culinary innovation continues to be a strong positive predictor of tourist satisfaction. Additionally, destination competitiveness positively impacts the satisfaction level. These findings suggest that both the destination's competitiveness and culinary innovation influence satisfaction.

It can be argued that the combined tourist satisfaction model assumes that perceptions at the destination level and specific satisfaction-related culinary cues would also interact.

Relatively, regression report models for the final field study would include unstandardized regression coefficients along with confidence intervals, diagnostics for residuals, multicollinearity and inflation bias checks, and various other standard tests. It would also be interesting to see whether the image of the destination plays a mediating role concerning competitiveness and culinary innovation, along with the satisfaction of potential repeat visitors. The possibility of moving beyond correlation toward a more precise depiction of the underlying mechanism would be welcomed.

Table 5. Regression Output Predicting Tourist Satisfaction

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Constant	0.978	0.078	12.568	< .001
Culinary innovation	0.556	0.038	14.487	< .001
Destination competitiveness	0.197	0.046	4.293	< .001

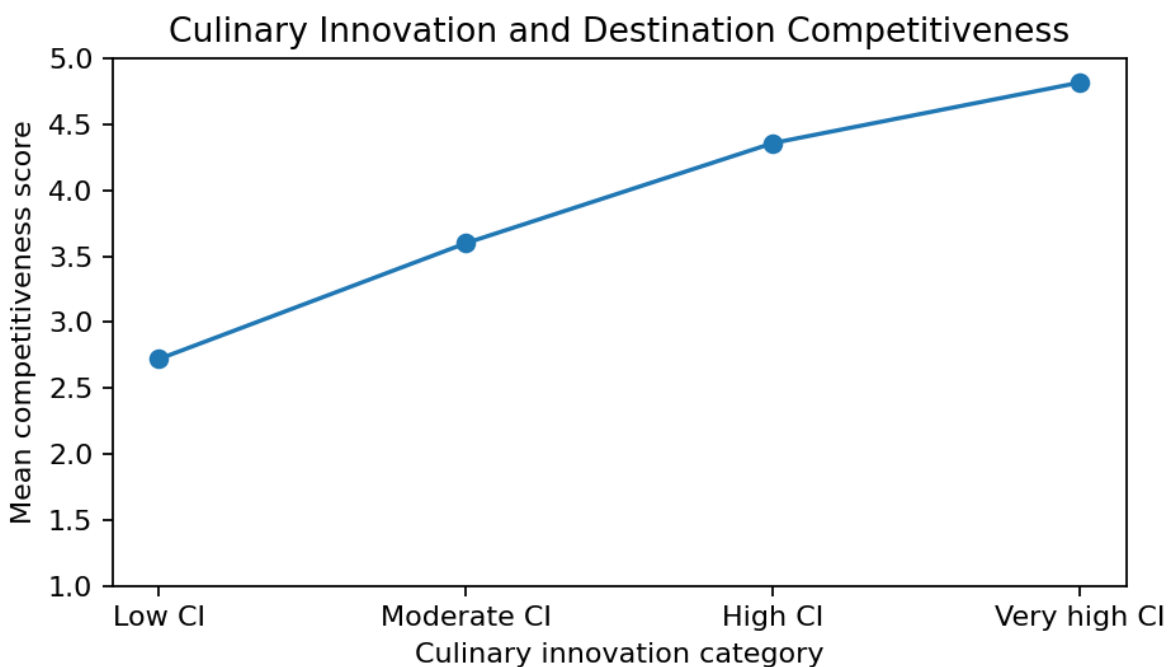


Figure 4: Relationship between culinary innovation and destination competitiveness.

6.5 ANOVA and Hypothesis Summary

Across the tourist purpose categories in the pilot structure, $F = 0.15$, $p = 0.961$ when groups are compared. This result does not show a statistically significant difference in the illustrative dataset regarding purpose category and culinary satisfaction. Segmentation, in this instance, is important to show that different categories may represent differential value to the culinary experience. A larger field sample, collected over the different seasons, may show more significant differences between, for instance, pilgrimage, wellness, leisure, business, and adventure tourists. Therefore, the hypothesis summary

should be viewed with caution. The proposed relationships between culinary Innovation and elements such as satisfaction, competitiveness, and message, and intention to revisit, and, ultimately, to make positive recommendations, can be considered to be positively related and are likely to be valid. The group difference hypothesis, however, requires additional validation. This difference is valid in terms of research integrity and for the real-life applicability of the research. Managers may focus on the model to appropriately inform data collection and design interventions, but should not foolishly use it to justify a claim for evidence prior to undertaking the necessary fieldwork to validate it.

Table 6: Hypothesis Summary

Hypothesis	Statement	Analytical Status
H1	Culinary innovation positively influences tourist satisfaction.	Supported in pilot pattern
H2	Culinary innovation positively influences destination image.	Theoretically supported; field testing required
H3	Tourist satisfaction positively influences destination competitiveness.	Supported in pilot pattern
H4	Destination image positively influences destination competitiveness.	Theoretically supported; field testing required
H5	Competitiveness positively influences revisit intention and word-of-mouth.	Supported in pilot pattern
H6	Satisfaction differs across tourist purpose categories.	Not supported in pilot ANOVA; further testing required

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 Culinary Innovation as Experience Design

The evidence describes culinary innovation as experience design. Taste is not the only factor fans judge food on. They look at many factors including but not limited to the freshness, smell, appearance, texture, the interaction with the service staff, the hygiene, the fairness of the price, any dietary restrictions, and the cultural implications. The experience of a Mandua or Bhatt dish in Uttarakhand could be memorable if it's linked to local farming, and the staff members integrate it into the guests' journey, and it is tasty and presented nicely. The dish could also be memorable if the staff members explain it to the guests. The experience could be bad if the dish lacks any of those factors and it is placed on the table with no regard to the guests, and the staff members have no confidence in what they are serving.

Designing an experience requires managing the right amount of novelty. Tourists may crave local cuisine, but they may also have never experienced a dish with that texture or that level of spice. To combat that, a dish may be served with multiple other traditional local dishes that are served in different ways as a tasting platter, or the dish may be served in a "tourist friendly" way to help aid in the experience. That may mean serving a sent a dish that is in a traditional local style, but may be served along a more contemporary style of cuisine. It is still important that the servings hold their traditional local style. The goal is to attract tourists to experience the local cuisine in a friendly way. This draws on authenticity tourism, but still manages to have the local style and keeps the offerings friendly and engages the tourists in the dining experience.

7.2 Culinary Innovation and Destination Image

The promotion and incorporation of food into tourism can benefit Uttarakhand's destination image in four ways. The first is by positioning the state as one of the culturally-rich Himalayan regions. Various ingredients along with culturally-relevant dishes and local confections can fulfill this. The second is by strengthening Rishikesh's image as a wellness-centered community due to its yoga retreats, Ayurveda, and mountain living. This area can be supported by offering millet-based dishes, herbal infusions, greens, and vegetarian meals, provided they are positioned and communicated carefully. The third is by advancing the image of sustainability through local sourcing, seasonality, and waste reduction. The final is by strengthening the emotional image of caring hospitality and homeliness that is particularly found in most homestays and small hotels.

Traditional tourism is dependent on the experience to build a destination image. Modern tourism heavily relies on its online image. An appealing local thali, a chef and/or cook sharing their cultural roots through local cuisine, as well as a thali class, can

all help build the brand through Instagram, YouTube, travel blogs, and other review platforms. The committed efforts to build a destination's food image can help build its reputation; however, if the destination expresses a commitment to local food but the experience has poor hygiene, excessive commercialisation, and superficial service, that image will be permanently damaged through online reviews.

7.3 Culinary Innovation and Destination Competitiveness

The role of culinary innovation in building destination competitiveness is predominantly in differentiation and value creation. Uttarakhand competes with other Himalayan and hill destinations along with Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Sikkim, and Darjeeling, along with plains-based spiritual and wellness destinations. While the natural beauty and religious significance of Uttarakhand are core assets, many destinations provide mountains, temples, rivers, and cafes. There is potential to add a unique layer of differentiation with local cuisine, which is authentic to the place, can be replicated, and is economically tied to the local community.

Competitiveness in this domain relies on network collaboration. Innovations can occur in individual hotels, but a stronger destination identity is achieved when the various stakeholders involved are telling coherent food stories. To illustrate, a Kumaon food trail can be designed to link destinations such as Almora, Ranikhet, Kausani, and Bhimtal, and Nainital through local food offerings, confectioneries, bazaars, homestays, and food-related activities. In a similar way, a Garhwal wellness food circuit can be designed to connect Rishikesh, Dehradun, Tehri, and the pilgrimage routes with satvik meals, millet, herbal concoctions, and a host of vegetarian offerings from the local region. These can help create a more even distribution of tourists, and extend their length of stay, amongst destinations in the region.

Importantly, competitiveness and value creation must be balanced. Culinary tourism should not facilitate the undue commercialization of local identity, or overload small producers. Fair principles of sourcing and pricing, accurate, and genuine portrayal of what is offered, along with community engagement, respect, and care for the environment should be a priority. The goal should not be to transform all culturally rich practices into sellable experiences. Identifying the right food differentiation experiences that destinations along with the communities are ready to share for a fair exchange is the priority.

7.4 Interpretation of the Analytical Model

Culinary innovation starts a chain that affects satisfaction, destination image, and perceived competitiveness and behavioral intention. This chain holds because tourists

encounter tangible elements such as dishes, menus, and service, which, along with the ambience, shape psychological elements such as perception, enjoyment, trust, and image. If these elements are positive, tourists are more likely to think the destination is unique and worthy of recommendation. Thus, the role of food in competitiveness is not that it is local, but because it is an experience that is high quality, meaningful, and can be communicated.

The initial correlations and regression results follow this logic; however, the biggest contribution was that they were the first of their kind. The results showed that subsequent studies could quantify the relationships. Further studies should attempt to test the complete model with the use of structural equations to analyze the actual tourists. This should be done to compare first and repeat, as well as domestic and international tourists, and tourists of different motivations. This should also be done to complement qualitative interviews with chefs, owners of homestay accommodations, farmers, women's groups, and tourism authorities to comprehend the limitations to culinary innovation.

8. Managerial and Policy Implications

8.1 Implications for Hotels, Restaurants, and Homestays

Rather than altering the food offerings for all meals and all days, operators should first focus on constructing a few meals or a few set menus, which might include local breakfast options, thalis, local beverages, local snacks, local desserts, or local thali tasting portions. Local beverages and local thali tasting portions might be included. Local meals or set menus should explain offerings in meal components, in addition to the source with suggestions for allergens and a brief cultural background. Tasting portions of local thalis should be available. Menu offerings should reflect more than tokenism. Local menu offerings should be prepared with the quality and authenticity required for local dining.

Additionally, operators should train all staff to answer any and all questions about local dining. Potential tourists may be more willing to eat local offerings once staff are able to explain offerings, as well as the local dining experience. In the absence of local dining, satisfaction may be improved if operators use QR codes to link short videos of local farmers, chefs, recipes, or local food stories. Digital tools should be used as adjuncts to personal hospitality, or local dining, rather than the principal means of local dining.

Menu engineering is valuable for integrating authenticity and profitability. Traditional dishes offer a variety of options that can be costed and portioned. These can also be paired with side dishes that are more familiar. An example of this would be a Mandua-based breakfast served with local chutney or curd, or with seasonal vegetables. Jhangora kheer can be offered as a regional dessert option in both a traditional form and a plated style. Buransh drinks can be offered as a local beverage with thoughtful and responsible marketing. Homestays can offer in-

home meals with prior agreement, and with clear pricing along with food safety protocols in place.

8.2 Implications for Tourism Planners

Food trails have the potential to be designed along most of the routes in the region. For example, pilgrimage circuits can offer vegetarian regional meals, local sweets, and community kitchens that promote safety. Wellness circuits can include millet-based meals, herbal drinks, cooking classes, and local foods with a nutrition focus. Eco-tourism circuits can have meals linked to the farm, low waste menus, and community food workshops. Hill leisure circuits can offer cafes, sweets, seasonal fruits, and local produce from market walks. The goal should be to develop a tourist experience that is more structured as opposed to disconnected promotional slogans.

Destination culinary branding should be supported by standards. A voluntary certification or recognition system for local food-friendly hospitality along the route can improve overall quality. Some of the criteria may include the safe preparation of local regional ingredients, staff training, along with a clear menu, local purchase, and responsible waste management, and the collection of visitor feedback. Tourism boards can feature certified units on their official websites and in promotional material. This type of recognition is a positive driver for businesses, and provides tourists with accurate and reliable information.

Policies should actively advocate for the support of local producers as the main driving factor behind culinary innovation is the availability of supply. The support of farmers and women's groups should include the provision of aggregation, packaging, and support for quality grading as well as trainings, cold storage as required, and links to hotels and cafes. In the absence of appropriate interventions, local sourcing will remain symbolic or, at best, sporadic. Tourism departments will need to work closely with agricultural, rural, food processing, and organizational skill development departments to create and establish a local culinary value chain.

8.3 Implications for Training Institutions

All hospitality and tourism training institutions in Uttarakhand should include regional cuisine innovations in their training. Students should be trained in the several components of cuisine including formulation of recipes, sensory skills, plating and presentation, nutrition, food safety and hygiene, costing, the local supply chain, and digital storytelling as a form of food entrepreneurship. Students should be trained to have respect for cultural and community knowledge and culinary skills.

Chef training should incorporate local cooks with experienced elders, members of women's self-help groups, farmers, and professional chefs. This model of training will support the retention of local culinary arts while allowing innovations for the hospitality industry. The aim of this training should be to create a diverse range of food options for market segments and, at the same time, support local food.

Table 7. Strategic Action Matrix for Culinary Innovation in Uttarakhand

Stakeholder	Recommended Action	Expected Contribution
Hotels and resorts	Create a focused regional menu, train staff, standardize recipes, document sourcing	Higher satisfaction and stronger differentiation
Homestays	Offer household food experiences, seasonal meals, farm links, and local stories	Authenticity and community-based value
Tourism planners	Develop food trails, certification, digital promotion, and circuit-based culinary branding	Destination competitiveness and longer stays
Training institutions	Conduct modules on mountain cuisine, food safety, menu design, and storytelling	Professional capacity and quality assurance
Local producers	Build supply aggregation, packaging, grading, and hotel linkages	Income generation and reliable sourcing
Digital marketers	Promote verified culinary stories, user-generated content, and review management	Online reputation and word-of-mouth

9. Theoretical Contributions

This study aids the development of food tourism theory by showing that culinary innovation encompasses more than consumer preference for local food. Innovation in tourism may include new ideas for food ingredients, authenticity, storytelling, food presentation, diversity of food menus, sourcing of food, and food service. These are different constructs in the study of food and tourism, and help the hospitality practitioner understand that a locality's different food services may give a locality competitive advantage in tourism.

The study aids the theory of destination competitiveness in that it shows how a specific micro hospitality practice can affect the perception of destinations at the macro level. In most competitiveness theory, resources and management are discussed at a broad level (Cronje & du Plessis, 2020; Dwyer, 2022; Mior Shariffuddin et al., 2023; Xia et al., 2024). This paper takes those broad constructs and applies them to the study of food. In this case local food is an inherited resource, an innovative food service is a creative resource, food service networks are enabling resources, and the sourcing, training, and certification of food services becomes the destination management for the service. The demand for tourist authenticity is a demand condition, and the intention to return is the performance of the market.

This paper also provides a context for Himalayan tourism and culinary innovation. Research in tourism and hospitality often focuses on urban destinations and ease of gastronomical travel (regions linked by transport), wine regions, islands, and heritage cities. In contrast, Uttarakhand demonstrates the intersection of culinary innovation with travel for other purposes such as pilgrimage, wellness, ecology, seasonality, leisure in the hills, and the development of homestays. The model is intended for other Himalayan destinations seeking to use local cuisine in a manner that does not diminish the local culture and the ecological context.

10. Limitations and Future Research

All research studies contain limitations of some sort. The most significant limitation in this study is the lack of verified field data at the respondent level. In the quantitative section, an analytical procedure is demonstrated using an early version of the manuscript's pilot structure. In this case, the proposed data come from the Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board (2025) and the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India (2025). The findings from the quantitative section, therefore, must be treated at best as a method illustration and not as a definitive empirical conclusion. A version of the study that is

aimed for publication must be based on the collection of original data from actual tourists and from hospitality professionals in the selected destinations, during the selected seasons, and from the selected business types.

The second limitation concerns segmentation. Different visitors travel to Uttarakhand for different reasons, with different budgets, dietary restrictions, different cultural backgrounds, and differing levels of familiarity with the local cuisine. Future studies should attempt to differentiate pilgrimage tourists from wellness, leisure, adventure, and business tourists. They should differentiate tourists based on nationality and age, as well as first-time tourists from repeat tourists. Such segmentation can define a target market for culinary innovation.

The third limitation is the lack of evidence on the supply side. It is not enough to say tourists are satisfied to say that culinary innovation is possible. Future research should interview chefs, hotel and homestay owners, farmers, members of women self-help groups, food vendors, and tourism officials. This group of people could highlight the challenges involved in hygiene, seasonality, the flexibility of recipes, and the lack of demand. This sort of research is needed to provide a stronger foundation for policymaking. It is also important to combine quantitative with qualitative approaches.

Future studies can also analyze digital data. We can search online reviews, social media posts, food images, and travel blogs to see how tourists describe the food image of Uttarakhand. Sentiment analysis and theme categorization can reveal common themes of food taste, hygiene, authenticity, price, and dining ambiance and service. Digital data can act as supplementary survey data and provide a way for tourism boards to assess the reputation of a destination in real time.

11. CONCLUSION

When paired with authenticity, service and food quality, and sustainability, and storytelling, food innovation can be a key component of customer satisfaction and a competitive advantage in the hospitality framework of Uttarakhand. The state has diverse food practices and traditions from ritual and everyday food, and recipes from the two regions, Kumaon and Garhwal. These food traditions can provide Uttarakhand a competitive advantage and a unique position from competitors, especially in an increasingly fast pace and competitive tourism market that values healthy, local, and memorable experiences.

This study posits that food innovation consists of more than local ingredients or fancy presentations. It encompasses a whole system of local ingredients, chefs, food hygiene, staff, supply chains, the digital world, and supportive policies. Tourists will be satisfied with local food that is delicious, safe, presentable,

and affordable, and expresses the identity of the destination. The satisfaction of food creates a favorable image of the destination, and the desire to return to the destination and recommend it to other people.

For Uttarakhand, the most effective strategy involves the implementation of regional menus, food trails, local sourcing networks, and training and certification programs and tools, as well as the integration of storytelling frameworks and cooperation among the sectors of tourism, agriculture, food processing, and rural development. Culinary innovation can support hospitality business and community and cultural sustainability. The next necessary step is the collection of primary data for multiple tourism circuits and all seasons to strengthen the proposed model. With this type of data and effective implementation, it is possible to develop and promote culinary experiences as a unique component of Uttarakhand tourism in the Himalayas.

12. Declarations

Data availability: The verified secondary data sources used for tourism context are the Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board's Tourist Statistics of Major Tourist Destinations Year 2024 and the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India's India Tourism Data Compendium 2025. No respondent-level primary dataset accompanies this manuscript. The quantitative tables and figures are retained as a transparent pilot analytical illustration from the working manuscript and must be replaced with verified field data before journal submission.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding: No external funding is reported.

Ethical note: A final empirical study should obtain informed consent from respondents and follow institutional ethical requirements for survey-based research.

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Appendix A. Suggested Survey Items for Field Validation

Culinary innovation: The hospitality establishment offered dishes based on local Uttarakhand ingredients; the menu presented regional cuisine creatively; the food presentation was attractive; staff explained the cultural background of local dishes; the establishment used fresh and locally sourced ingredients; local dishes were adapted without losing their traditional identity.

Tourist satisfaction: I was satisfied with the taste of the local food; I was satisfied with food hygiene and safety; I found the local food experience good value for money; the food experience improved my overall satisfaction with the destination; I would like to try more local dishes during future visits.

Destination image and competitiveness: Local cuisine made Uttarakhand feel distinctive; the food experience strengthened my image of Uttarakhand as a culturally rich destination; culinary offerings made the destination more competitive than other hill destinations; I would recommend Uttarakhand's local food experiences to others; I would share positive reviews or photographs of the food experience online.

Appendix B. Suggested Interview Prompts for Supply-Side Validation

For chefs and food and beverage managers: Which regional dishes are most feasible for regular menu inclusion, and what barriers are faced in standardizing taste, hygiene, presentation, costing, and service time?

For homestay owners and community cooks: Which household food practices are visitors most interested in, and how can these practices be shared respectfully without over-commercializing family or community traditions?

For farmers, women's groups, and local suppliers: What procurement arrangements would help hospitality units source Mandua, Jhangora, Bhatt, Gahat, Buransh products, local greens, chutneys, sweets, and seasonal vegetables consistently?

For tourism officials and training institutions: What certification, food-trail design, skill modules, and digital promotion strategies can help convert Uttarakhand cuisine into a sustainable destination asset?