



Exploring the roles of local food in developing Lenggong Valley as a rural food tourism destination

Mohd Nazri Abdul Raji^{1,2}, Shahrim Ab. Karim³, Farah Adibah Che Ishak³, Mohd Mursyid Arshad⁴, Mohd Aliff Abdul Majid⁵

¹Department of Family and Consumer Science, Faculty of Technical and Vocational, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia

²Institut Peradaban Melayu, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia

³Department of Food Service and Management, Faculty of Food Science and Technology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

⁴Department of Professional Development and Continuing Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

⁵Department of Foodservice Management, Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Selangor Branch, Puncak Alam Campus, Selangor, Malaysia

Correspondence: Mohd Nazri Abdul Raji (email: mohd.nazri@ftv.upsi.edu.my)

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Abstract

Integrating the relationship between food and tourism destination has been an important issue in the current tourism scenario. More tourism leaders globally are recognizing the important role local food can play in strengthening a rural destination's tourism product. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the role of local food in developing Lenggong Valley as a rural food tourism destination. This study is applying a qualitative method using in-depth interview and participant observation. The finding identified four steps in developing rural food tourism destination; i) identifying local food components, ii) examining the capabilities of local food as tourism product; iii) evaluating local food as tourism product; and iv) selecting suitable marketing strategy to promote food tourism. This study contributes to expanding research on food tourism in constructing the rural food tourism framework. The information in this study leading to new ways of thinking about local food, by integrating local food and tourism resources to enhance rural destination attraction, since local food at rural destination attract little research in the field of tourism management.

Keywords: food tourism, food tourism strategy, Lenggong Valley, local food, rural tourism, rural food tourism framework.

Introduction

The number of gastronomy tourists who travel for local food are increasing and many destinations have since started to promote their local food as the core element of their intangible heritage offerings (Ellis, et al., 2018; Horng & Tsai, 2012; Okumus et al., 2007). This is because local food showcases the beauty of foreign culinary cultures alien to the tourists (Horng & Tsai, 2012; Kim et al., 2022). In addition, food adds legitimacy to the experiences of tourists through the local food consumption and other local food culture activities (Sims, 2009). This authentic experience is important for tourists who are looking for a mean to connect with the destination (Steffen & Doppler, 2020). Thus, integrating local food in the tourism destination provides a more authentic experience whereby tourists can escape from their mundane everyday routines. On the flip side, tourists may be tempted to stay longer in one destination by the availability of these local food and other food-related activities (Hall et al., 2003; Baiden et al., 2022).

Moreover, the local food in the tourist destinations as an important heritage product helps in developing food tourism in many regions, states or countries. The same case applied around the world, as local food used as marketing strategies for food tourism and it is implemented with positive impacts. For example, the food of the French, Italian and Thailand are well recognized and celebrated worldwide and have long been an attraction to tourists accordingly (Karim & Chi, 2010). Many studies have investigated how local foods contribute to the sustainable destination's competitiveness (Hall & Sharples, 2003; Hjalager & Johansen, 2013; Pratt, 2013; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Skuras et al., 2006; Telfer & Wall, 1996) and many destinations are capitalizing on the potential to promote foods as a unique product (Bessière, 1998; Jiménez Beltrán et al., 2016; Sims, 2009). Based on the perspectives from past studies, it can be argued that the theories and model developed in these studies may be applicable to all tourist destinations. However, the majority of these empirical studies were based on Western European scholars' viewpoints (Kim & Iwashita, 2015). Furthermore, previous studies have investigated the use of local food in developing marketing strategies in urban and developed countries (Batziakas et al., 2019; Brayden et al., 2018; Choe & Kim, 2018; Madaleno et al., 2017; Matwick & Matwick, 2017; Wu & Wu, 2016). Meanwhile, little empirical study has been conducted on the development of rural food tourism. Thus, the marketing strategies for food tourism development from the previous researches may be different or do not fit with the rural destination context. Consequently, more and specific strategies need to be explored to examine how local food can be used to develop rural food tourism. Thus, this study aims to explore the roles of local food in developing rural food tourism focusing a case study at Lenggong Valley, Perak, Malaysia.

Lenggong Valley is a rural tourist destination in Peninsular Malaysia and located 274 km north of Kuala Lumpur. Lenggong Valley was declared as a World Heritage Site (WHS) on 30th June 2012 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) due to the its prehistorical human settlement (Kwong & Mohamed, 2017). The recognition as a WHS has increased the attraction of Lenggong Valley as a rural tourist destination in the state of Perak, Malaysia (Abdul Aziz et al., 2014). However, in Lenggong Valley, tourists mainly come to visit the archaeological heritage sites such as the limestone caves, the tombs of dignitaries and numerous heritage buildings (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2016). Abdul Aziz et al., (2014) stated that Lenggong Valley is rich with non-archaeological resource such as local food culture that can be tapped into potential tourism product.

Literature review

Food tourism

Many academics have revealed that food tourism development is becoming a crucial element to a destination's sustainability and competitiveness and holds great potential in enhancing tourists' experiences in many destinations (Kim & Iwashita, 2015; Kim et al., 2021). This is because food tourism goes beyond the dining experience which includes a variety of food-related activities such as a visit to the farmer's market, attending food festivals, factory tours and discovering a region's unique dishes (du Rand, 2003). Hall and Mitchell (2001) provided a preliminary understanding of food tourism in the context of motivation and defined food tourism as "visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of specialist food production regions are the primary factor for travel". In this sense, food tourism is related to travelling experience motivated by local food attraction and activities that are different from the tourist's country home. Thus, a trip to a familiar restaurant that has the same taste or is similar to the food consumed at home when travelling is not considered as part of food tourism. However, according Hall and Sharples (2003), the definition of food tourism by Hall and Mitchell (2001) still conveys a broad understanding in the context of the tourism industry. The authors argued that there is a need to further differentiate or categorize between tourists who enjoy food as part of the travel experience and tourists whose visit of a destination is motivated by food interest activities. There are many factors that influence tourists' interest in food related activities. Thus, it is useful to draw a comparison between common components of food tourism namely gourmet tourism, cuisine tourism, gastronomic tourism, and culinary tourism (du Rand, 2003). From this, Hall and Sharples (2003) developed three categories of food tourism based on level of interest as a motivation to travel: primary (gourmet, cuisine and gastronomic tourism); secondary (culinary tourism once tourists have arrived at a destination) and subsidiary to other interests (rural/urban tourism whereby food is only a basic need to survive).

Consistent with these definitions, Ignatov and Smith (2006) viewed culinary tourism as "tourism trips during which the purchase or consumption of regional foods (including beverages) or the observation and study of food production (from agriculture to cooking schools) represent a significant motivation or activity". Furthermore, Richards (2002) contributed to the understanding of gastronomy tourism as a tourist can experience many forms of food related activities from sampling the 'raw' product at the farm or vineyard to the gastronomy experience linked to the cultural and agricultural resources of a specific destination. For example, a tourist can learn about the ingredients used, learn to cook, and experience the way in which the ingredients are grown. This definition implies that culinary tourism is more than just eating food and drinking when travelling, but also includes a self-aware interest and understanding of the place through food. Therefore, local food and unique cooking style not only play significant role in differencing tourist destinations but improve destination culture image and identity of the country, which makes local food culture a major attraction within the travel destination.

Rural Tourism Destination

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (1994) defined rural tourism on the basis of location as a tourism activity that takes place in the countryside. Another

interpretation of rural tourism has been proposed by several scholars. For example, Bramwell (1994) referred to the term as associated with tourism activities and interests in farming, nature, arts, heritage, sports, adventure, health and education. Reichel et al., (2000) viewed the term as a remote area, open space, and small-scale enterprise. Sidalia, Kastenholz and Bianchi (2013) related rural tourism with specific history, culture, traditions and food heritage. Meanwhile, a number of studies have highlighted the growth of rural tourism, for instance, Silpley and Sharpley (1997) proposed that rural tourism has the intrinsic value of the sense of space, peace and escape from a modern lifestyle. Brown et al., (2000) suggested that rural tourism is the place where tourists could perceive certain qualities such as the natural beauty landscape, quietness and uniqueness. Furthermore, Eruera (2008) proposed for rural tourism to incorporate a range of tourism activities including natural attraction, man-made attraction, accommodation, transportation and information systems. Dimitrovski et al., (2012) emphasized on rural tourism cultural activities associated with local communities.

Since tourism destinations are competing for tourists in the global market, rural tourism destinations need to continuously identify characteristics that make them distinguishable. Thus, presenting a strong identity and positive image are critically important for every tourist destination to sustain in this industry. In this regard, Lenggong Valley is no exception and it needs further improvement to increase its competitive advantages in the tourism market. Adeyinka-Ojo and Khoo-Lattimore (2013) suggested highlighting the different core products that are locally produced which would help in creating more tourism product activities in a place. Integrating local food in a rural destination like Lenggong Valley may help boost economic development in rural areas.

Method and study area

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to explore the role of local food in developing Lenggong Valley as a rural food tourism destination. In particular, researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured interview with 8 informants comprised of traditional local food experts, local food providers, homestay owner and local authorities. To increase credibility of the findings, participant observation was also carried out after the interview session with selected informants. This helped the researcher to understand and verify the information provided by the informants in the prior interview. As stated by Creswell (2013), observation can be an effective method that complements other methods. Participant observation with the permission from selected informants was conducted at local food restaurants, local food events, and a homestay at Lenggong Valley. During participant observation, field notes were taken and recorded, and visual materials were also captured.

Purposive sampling technique was used in recruiting the informants for in-depth, semi-structured interview. As stated by Silverman (2013), qualitative researcher will use the purposive sampling technique to achieve the purpose of the study as the selection informant based on their ability to provide the required information. The selected informants were based on selection criterion constructed by the researchers based on purpose of study and research questions. Thus, the selection of informant criterion where the informants have at least three years' experience in Lenggong local food promotion initiative and willing to share their experiences. To increase the number of informants, snowball sampling technique was used for this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argued that the snowball sampling technique is used when it is difficult to reach

the participants. For this study, other informants were identified based on the recommendation of the initially identified informants. Furthermore, in line with the research questions, researcher constructed interview protocol that cover question on what is the meaning of Lenggong's local food; how local food have been used as promotional tools for Lenggong Valley; what are the challenges in promoting Lenggong's local food; and how local food can be used to develop Lenggong Valley as a rural food tourism destination. To improve the interview protocol in the actual study, researchers conducted a pilot study with two informants. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a pilot study is more than trying out data collection methods that have been selected based on some criteria. For the actual data gathered, each of the in-depth semi-structured interview took between one to one and half hours and was digitally recorded. Two different audio recorders were used as a means of support if one of the tools did not work properly. The transcription process was undertaken after completed the interview session. Constant comparative technique was adopted to analysed data for this study as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Constant comparative technique involved comparing one segment of data with another to examine similarities and differences.

Results and discussion

Identifying local food components

The process of developing Lenggong Valley as rural food tourism starts with identifying the local food component and unique characteristics based on the food resources and culture. There are four components of Lenggong local food defined by the informants, including; i) practicing traditional food culture using natural ingredients; ii) Malay traditional food as main dishes; and iii) freshwater fish sources are used as signature dishes.

a. Practicing traditional food culture using natural ingredients.

The experience in helping their family members search for food ingredients in the forest such as local herbs and spices to grow and harvest food at their backyard, and to prepare and cook food for their family, were highly valued. Additionally, this culinary tradition is still being practiced until today among the community in Lenggong Valley as stated by Stakeholder 4 and 6,

“...the fruits from the forest are still available today and it can be easily found. Some of the villagers make *halwa* (sweets) from *kelempong* fruit, some of the forest ingredients or fruits are made into traditional medications. Who showed it? the past generation. Whatever edible plant existed in the surrounding are made into cooking recipes and medicines...” (Stakeholder 4).

“...*kemahang* stem, it can be made into *kerabu*, it is still being consumed by the locals, the *kemahang* need to be roasted first because it can cause itchiness. One more thing, the person needs to know how to roast it well before making it into *kerabu* just like how it was practiced in the past...” (Stakeholder 6).

b. Malay traditional food as main dishes.

The practice of Malay food among the community can be seen from the utilization of the coconut milk and *ulam* (native salad) as a prominent ingredient in producing dishes like *kerabu* (Malay mixed salad). As explained by Stakeholder 7 and 5,

“...actually, the influence of Malay culture can be seen from the cooking, we use a lot of creamy ingredients, the first example is coconut milk, it becomes *kerabu*, there is a lot of *kerabu* types. They also add lemongrass and galangal, that is the Malay food tradition here...” (Stakeholder 7).

“...here we have a variety of *ulam* we serve *ulam raja* (*cosmos caudatus*), *pegaga* (pennywort) as salad, *pegaga* can be made into *kerabu*, we use *ulam raja* or *selom* (water celery) for *kerabu*. What we call as Malay food culture, these are our local foods...” (Stakeholder 5).

c. Freshwater fish sources are used as signature dishes.

From the interview and participant observation, it was found that this area is abundant with freshwater fish resources (Figure 1). *Loma* fish (*Thynnichthys thynnoides*) and *tengalan* fish (*Puntius wool*) are the most popular types of freshwater fish that can be found in this area. Authority 1 said,

“...we have plenty of rivers here, such as Sungai Perak, Sungai Temelong, Sungai Lenggong, Sungai Kuak. These rivers have a lot of fish, the famous *tengalan* fish, *loma* fish which cannot be found in other rivers except in Perak. *Tengalan* fish can be found elsewhere but it will be different, most of the *loma* fish are in Hulu Perak district...” (Authority 1).



Figure 1: Variety of freshwater fish sold in Lenggong's wet market

Examining the capabilities of local food as tourism products

The second step was to examine the local stakeholders and relevant authorities' capabilities in using local food as tourism products for Lenggong Valley. Four main strategies have been identified, namely; i) organize traditional food festivals; ii) documentation of local food as national heritage food; iii) publish traditional recipe books; and iv) market local food through commercialization.

a. Organize traditional food festival.

Many traditional foods were introduced to the public in this traditional food festival. It was a good platform whereby the visitors and tourists have the chance to sample traditional local food and experienced the Lenggong food culture. Authority 3 and Stakeholder 8 stated,

“...it is a good initiative for us to do the traditional food festival in Lenggong. there were a lot of traditional food were prepared. So, the visitors can taste the Lenggong's food that were prepared by the village community...” (Authority 3).

“...more visitors came to Lenggong's food festival, they were Lenggong residents, there were also visitors from outside Lenggong who came to learn, there were visitors from Kuala Lumpur. The outsiders were amazed to learn about rice cook in bamboo shoot, they can learn about the cooking ingredients, this would expose them, there were also coconut grating festival...” (Stakeholder 8).

b. Documentation of local food as national heritage food.

It was found that local food from Lenggong Valley namely *kebebe* (traditional local fruit salad), *ikan pekasam* (fermented fish) and *bubur anak lebah* (local sweet) were listed as a national heritage food under the National Heritage Act 2005 (ACT 645). This is to ensure that heritage food remains as part of the Malaysian food culture and continues to be enjoyed by the current and future generations. Authority 2 and 1 said,

“...as the effort we have cooperated with the Department of Heritage to register the traditional food of Lenggong such as *kebebe*, *ikan pekasam*, and *bubur anak lebah*...” (Authority 2).

“...*kebebe* is well known since 2015, it is recognized as the national heritage food, we have also introduced *kebebe* at states level through the Department of Heritage...” (Authority 1).

c. Publish traditional recipe books.

Publish recipe books was another initial effort in promoting local food as tourism product. It was also stated in the interview that these books are important for the current and future generation as a reference book about traditional foods in Lenggong Valley. Authority 1 and 2 said,

“...our objective was to publish the recipes in a book, it is one of the initiatives, since there is no book about Lenggong’s food and most villagers of Lenggong are not able to share the information as they are getting old and forgetful. So we take the initiative to publish a book on the foods that are available here, it is also as a method of promotion...” (Authority 1).

“...the recipe book entitled ‘endangered heritage foods’ was selected as main event for Lenggong Carnival 2017 as a result of the collection of recipes made for Lenggong. Previously in 2016 we have also published a recipe book entitled ‘Lenggong heritage cuisine recipe’ and launched at Lenggong Carnival 2016, at the district level we were very active as we wanted to focus on the food branch units...” (Authority 2).

d. Market local food through commercialization.

Food served on *talam* by several local restaurants in Lenggong Valley were also found in the interview and participant observation analysis. This complete set menu is suitable for four to five people (Figure 2). Stakeholder 7 explained,

“...the way that we promote the food of Lenggong is through the restaurants. They highlighted the local food. Firstly, the restaurant’s name is Teringat Lenggong, they also promoted the food dishes available at Lenggong, they served in a *talam*. Similar to Kebebe Cafe, they also served food in a *talam*...” (Stakeholder 7).



Evaluating local food as tourism products

The third step is to evaluate the promotional gap from the initial efforts using local food as tourism product in Lenggong Valley. In this section, the researchers analyze the challenges face

by the informants to promote Lenggong local food. Three challenges were identified from the initial local food promotion strategies including; i) changing political landscape; ii) not enough support and effort; and iii) lack of tourism facilities.

a. Changing political landscape.

The change of the new government political party during the 14th Malaysian general election was one of the reasons why this food event has not continued. Stakeholder 8 and Authority 3 stated,

“...previously the food festival is held every two years, but it has stopped due to the change of government this year, so we have no idea what is their next project...” (Stakeholder 8).

“...the best thing that have been made, and I think it should be continued, Lenggong’s food festival. I am not sure since it is not fixed, it is seasonal. Previously it was established by former member of Parliament, the change in the government probably causing it slower...” (Authority 3).

b. Not enough support and effort.

Another challenge to promote local food was about insufficient efforts and support of local food promotion from the responsible bodies. According to Stakeholder 7 and 6, the underlying problem was about the little support which existed or is available for local food providers such as restaurateurs to promote or operate eateries. They said,

“...as what I have mentioned, this promotion effort cannot be done individually. We need help from others who can facilitate us in developing food promotion strategy...” (Stakeholder 7).

“...there is someone who has taken the initiatives, but it is ineffective, and if we want to ask for help it should be from the related departments, which is the department from tourism, heritage, they should play their roles to highlight the local food, that is what I think...” (Stakeholder 6).

c. Lack of tourism facilities.

Tourism facilities was another important finding regarding current food promotional gaps stated by Authority 2 and 3. The facilities for tourists were not enough especially on accommodation. They said,

“...rooms offered for staying are limited. We do not have hotels here except for Tasik Raban Resort, Lenggong Rest House and homestay, this is the challenges...” (Authority 2).

“...the main challenge is Lenggong itself, in terms of facilities and the conditions at Lenggong although it has received award from UNESCO, in my opinion, Lenggong is not fully prepared to receive a large number of visitors...” (Authority 3).

Selecting suitable marketing strategy to promote food tourism

After identifying local food components from the internal resources and the capabilities and challenges of initial efforts in promoting local food as tourism product, the final step is selecting suitable marketing strategies to develop food tourism. There are four potential strategies proposed by the informants in this study, which are; i) conduct research on local food development; ii) develop food tourism packages; iii) strengthening local food promotional strategy, and; iv) improve and enhance tourist facilities.

a. Conduct research on local food development.

There are variety of unique local foods available in Lenggong Valley, especially the traditional cuisines made from freshwater fish and wild edible plants, can potentially be used as tourist attractions. The research on these food products can be developed to create more opportunities, which can improve the competitive advantage of Lenggong Valley as a rural food tourism destination. Stakeholder 6 and Authority 1 said,

“...Malay food products have the potential to be marketed. A lot of potential, there are many things we could create, example from freshwater fish, local plants, hence adding more new products. The villagers can search for ideas, but we should find something that is suitable to our niche, we need to carry out research before taking an action...” (Stakeholder 6).

“...there are many kinds of food here that can be an attraction, but the product itself need to be improved. For example, we have *pekasam* development center specially for *pekasam*, this center helps *pekasam* producers on rebranding or technology advancement. We will try to sustain our traditional food, but it needs to be adapted appropriately with current trends...” (Authority 1).

b. Develop food tourism packages.

Creating culinary tour packages was another finding regarding the proposed strategy in developing rural food tourism in Lenggong Valley. The tour package could offer a variety of different experiences by integrating food and non-food activities. Stakeholder 4 and 5 stated,

“...another way is by improving the tourism facilities, tourism package for example the activities to do here. This can attract visitors to come here, example cave tour, enjoying waterfall, tasting food of Lenggong, visiting deer farm, *kelulut* farm...” (Stakeholder 4).

“...this can be a tourism package which part of the activities is observing and experiencing cooking Lenggong’s traditional food. When they return to their home country, they can teach their friends about Lenggong, hopefully Lenggong can be famous internationally...” (Stakeholder 5).

c. Strengthening local food promotional strategy.

A clear development marketing plan is needed to promote Lenggong food at the international level. Authority 2 and 7 stated,

“...I think it is enough to distribute pamphlet or brochure, can put on passenger seat, because foreigners would like to know about Malaysia, about Lenggong. Airport is a strategic place, or promoting in tourism center like in Kuala Lumpur...” (Authority 2).

“...minor thing that can be done in every homestay is for example displaying list of Lenggong’s food. There are many homestay here namely Laman Bonda, Kapten Rosli, Warisan, Eba Homestay, people who go there will see, we will show them where to get, can show how to get to Teringat Lenggong, Kebebe Café, Restoran Tasik Raban, it means that they get the list of location for traditional food from every homestay...” (Stakeholder 7).

d. Improve and enhance tourist facilities.

The existing tourist facilities should be upgraded and improved because the present condition including the signage and public infrastructure were not enough to support the development of food tourism. Authority 3 and 1 said,

“...also, the local facilities need to be improved in order to cater tourists in Lenggong especially the accommodations, Lenggong’s food have viralled hence people started to come here, therefore there are many things need to be improved and we will try gradually...” (Authority 3).

“...the basic facilities or public facilities at the heritage sites, archaeology gallery, and cave in my opinion need to be improved. It might be too late to wait for funds, probably do communal work in a big group with the helps from local authorities and other local representatives to clean and eliminate harmful stuff in the area so that it will be safe for everyone...” (Authority 1).

Overview of framework for rural food tourism development

In creating rural food tourism development framework (figure 3), its start with identify and classify local food components. This is to ensure the local food components are rare, valuable, and inimitable. Second, a destination needs to confirm that it possesses essential elements to support the development of food tourism. Examine local food resources core capabilities from the initial promotion strategies including food facilities (e.g., local food restaurants, traditional food restaurant and food store), food-related activities (e.g., traditional food event, local food demonstration and local food exhibition) and others (e.g., published traditional recipe books and documented local food as national food heritage) are essential in strengthening food tourism marketing strategies. Third, tourist responsible bodies and local authorities should evaluate and

classified the local food promotional gap. Identifying promotion gaps will help the destination to adjust the strategies and turn it into competitive advantages. The last step is propose suitable marketing strategies such as create culinary package, conduct research on local food development, strengthening local food promotional strategy and improve and enhance tourist facilities. This is to strengthen the initial food promotion strategy and enhance the culinary identity. The marketing strategies, which integrate the natural resources and local culture features, tourism facilities, food related-activities, policies and previous strategies, are the most important part of developing rural food tourism destination.

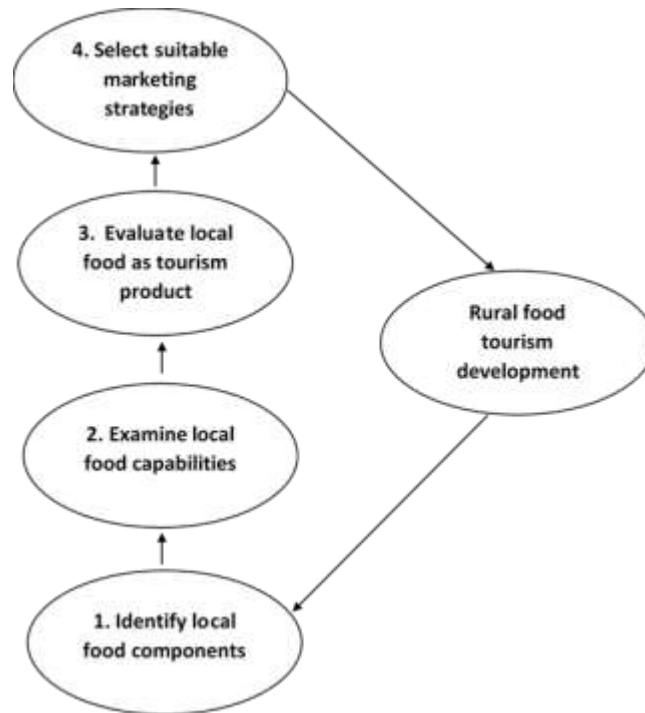


Figure 3: Rural food tourism development framework

Conclusion

The findings showed that Lenggong Valley has many natural resources and food culture background that can be used to develop a diverse food tourism experience. For example, freshwater fish and wild edible plants are fully utilized to prepare traditional cuisines. Furthermore, the local food is dominated by the Malay ethnic background. The combination between diverse natural resources and unique local food culture practiced by the local community in Lenggong Valley were found to be different from other regions, which is attractive and suitable to be incorporated in the marketing strategy to develop Lenggong as a rural food tourism destination.

Overall, developing and implementing food tourism marketing strategies for Lenggong Valley requires careful preparation to integrate the relationship between the local food, culture and tourism. Government bodies and local communities must sit together and be creative to formulate marketing strategies. Other related industries such as the agriculture sector, tourism

and hospitality professionals, tourist agency and private agencies must also support the development of food tourism in Lenggong Valley. These responsible bodies will help improve the quality of local food products and services, provide the tourists with a diverse meaningful cultural experience, and sustain the image and identity Lenggong Valley as UNESCO WHS. Thus, the findings from this study provide a guideline to integrate the local food and tourism resources in developing marketing strategies for food tourism in Lenggong Valley. At the same time, the findings of the present study produced a rural food tourism development framework. The framework can also be applied to other similar potential location that have an interest in rural food tourism development.

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