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Traditional Rice Cake Enterprises and Culinary Tourism Identity in Plaza Lucero, Cabanatuan City, Nueva Ecija, Philippines

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ABSTRACT: This paper examined artificial intelligence (AI) in divestiture strategy and strategic decision-making of international oil companies (IOCs), with particular attention to Nigeria. The study aimed to examined how artificial intelligence improves the decision-making speed and quality of information used in divestiture strategies. A peer review qualitative data design was adopted. The study drawn evidence from peer-reviewed journals, and company's official reports, which focuses on divestment cases involving Shell Petroleum Development Spin-off of its onshore outlets, Eni' sale of Nigerian Agip Oil Company to Oando: Renaissance group, Total Energy's spin-off of its portfolio, and ExxonMobil's Spin-off of its Nigerian shallow-water subsidiary to Seplat Energy. The evidence was subjected to thematic content analysis on four decision domains: AI-driven asset valuation analytics, AI-driven human capitals analytics, AI-driven financial statement analytics, and post-divestment monitoring. The findings indicate that AI-driven asset valuation analytics, AI-driven human capitals analytics, AI-driven financial statement analytics, and post-divestment monitoring explained data quality, decision quality and decision-making speed. AI can integrate heterogeneous operational, financial, geological, market, regulatory and environmental information, identify patterns, generate scenarios and improve the speed and quality of strategic decisions. The paper concludes that AI-driven divestiture strategy with AI-driven human capitals analytics, AI-driven financial statement analytics improve strategic decision-making processes. It is recommended that IOCs should establish an AI-enabled portfolio intelligence platform that integrates AI-driven human capitals analytics, AI-driven financial statement analytics, and post-divestment monitoring data for decision support.

KEYWORDS: Artificial intelligence, Divestiture Strategy, Strategic Decision-Making, international oil companies, AI-Driven Asset Valuation, AI-Driven Financial Analytics.

INTRODUCTION

Culinary tourism has emerged as an important segment of tourism development because it bridges gastronomy, culture, and place identity, offering travelers authentic experiences that go beyond basic consumption and connect them to local traditions and heritage. Gastronomy tourism contributes to destination competitiveness, cultural preservation, and local economic participation by encouraging visitors to engage with local food products, culinary practices, and community stories (Lyceum of the Philippines University, 2022).

In the Philippines, government policy has increasingly recognized the strategic potential of gastronomy tourism. The Department of Tourism formally launched the Food and Gastronomy Tourism Strategic Framework and Roadmap 2024–2029 to position the country as a premier culinary destination in Southeast Asia by 2029. This framework aims to develop culinary zones, create food circuits that highlight regional diversity, and integrate local food experiences into the broader National Tourism Development Plan (Philippine News Agency, 2025). This represents the first time that food and gastronomy have been incorporated as a central pillar of Philippine tourism strategy, rather than an ancillary component of cultural tourism.

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Traditional rice cakes, locally known as kakanin, are among the most visible expressions of Philippine culinary heritage. Filipino kakanin such as bibingka and puto bumbong are rice-based delicacies that vary by region, preparation, and cultural practice, reflecting the diversity and historical roots of Filipino food culture. These delicacies are consumed not only during festive seasons but also throughout the year in some communities, symbolizing cultural continuity and shared tradition (Almansouri et al., 2021). While modernization can challenge traditional food practices, preserving and promoting indigenous food products helps sustain local identity and enriches the tourism experience.

In the context of Plaza Lucero, Cabanatuan City, bibingka and puto bumbong enterprises persist as small-scale traditional food businesses embedded in community life. These enterprises not only sell products but also represent cultural practices, preparation techniques, and food narratives that contribute to place identity. When food becomes a symbol of local heritage—as in these traditional rice cakes—it can reinforce destination distinctiveness, foster cultural pride, and attract visitors seeking meaningful and authentic culinary experiences (UN World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2024).

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on Destination Branding Theory, Cultural Heritage Theory, and Stakeholder Theory. Destination Branding Theory posits that local products and experiences shape the image and identity of destinations. Cultural Heritage Theory emphasizes the role of traditional practices in preserving community values. Stakeholder Theory recognizes that collaboration among business owners, local government units, tourism officers, and the community is critical for successful tourism development (Kotler et al., 2017; Smith, 2020).

Conceptually, this study examines how the profile of traditional rice cake enterprises including years of operation, number of employees, production capacity, and months of operation relates to their perceived contribution to culinary tourism identity, business practices, and challenges encountered. This exploration provides evidence for proposing a Culinary Tourism Development Plan that aligns local food enterprises with the broader goals of Philippine food and gastronomy tourism policy.

Hence, this study titled "Traditional Rice Cake Enterprises and Culinary Tourism Identity in Plaza Lucero, Cabanatuan City, Philippines" aimed to determine the profile of bibingka and puto bumbong business owners, analyze their contribution to the culinary tourism identity of Plaza Lucero, examine their business practices, and identify the challenges they faced. The results served as the basis for a development plan to strengthen the role of traditional rice cake enterprises within the culinary tourism landscape of Cabanatuan City.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive mixed-methods research design to examine the contribution of traditional rice cake enterprises, particularly bibingka and puto bumbong businesses, to the culinary tourism identity of Plaza Lucero, Cabanatuan City, Philippines. The descriptive design was appropriate because the study aimed to describe the profile of the enterprises, their perceived contribution to culinary tourism, their business practices, and the challenges they encountered. The mixed-methods approach allowed the researcher to gather both numerical data and narrative insights for a more complete understanding of the study.

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Plaza Lucero, Cabanatuan City, Philippines. This area was selected because it served as a public and community-centered space where traditional rice cake enterprises were present. Plaza Lucero provided a suitable setting for examining how bibingka and puto bumbong businesses contributed to local food culture, tourism identity, and destination image.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of the study were the owners of bibingka and puto bumbong enterprises operating in Plaza Lucero. They were selected through purposive sampling because they were directly involved in the production, selling, and promotion of traditional rice cakes. The respondents had at least one year of business operation, were actively selling bibingka or puto bumbong in Plaza Lucero, and were willing to participate in the study.

Research Instrument

The study used a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide as the main research instruments. The questionnaire gathered information on the profile of the enterprises, their contribution to culinary tourism identity, business practices, and challenges encountered. The interview guide was used to obtain deeper explanations from selected respondents regarding their experiences, practices, and perceptions as traditional rice cake entrepreneurs.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher first sought permission from the concerned authorities and business owners before conducting the study. After securing consent, the questionnaires were distributed to the respondents. Selected respondents were also interviewed to gather additional qualitative information. All responses were collected, organized, and prepared for analysis.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, and mean. These were used to describe the business profile and summarize the responses of the participants. The qualitative data from interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify common ideas, patterns, and experiences related to culinary tourism identity, business practices, and challenges.

Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical research practices throughout the data-gathering process. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, and their participation was voluntary. Their identities and business information were kept confidential. The collected data were used only for academic purposes and were stored securely.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of Bibingka and Puto Bumbong Business Owners in Plaza Lucero, Cabanatuan City, Philippines

Table 1. Years of Operation

Years of Operation	Frequency	Percentage
6–10 years	2	12.50%
11–15 years	1	6.25%
16–20 years	2	12.50%
21–25 years	2	12.50%
26–30 years	3	18.75%
31 years and above	6	37.50%
Total	**16**	**100%**

Table 1 shows that most of the respondents had been operating their bibingka and puto bumbong businesses for 31 years and above, with 6 out of 16 respondents or 37.50 percent. This was followed by those who had operated for 26–30 years, with 3 respondents or 18.75 percent. Meanwhile, the smallest group was composed of business owners operating for 11–15 years, with only 1 respondent or 6.25 percent.

This result implies that many traditional rice cake enterprises in Plaza Lucero were long-established businesses. Their long years of operation suggest business continuity, community acceptance, and sustained customer patronage. The presence of enterprises operating for more than three decades also indicates that bibingka and puto bumbong have remained relevant in the local food environment despite changing consumer preferences and market conditions.

An in-depth analysis suggests that these enterprises may function not only as food businesses but also as custodians of local culinary memory. Long years of operation allow business owners to preserve traditional recipes, preparation techniques, and customer relationships. However, the limited number of newer businesses may imply a possible concern regarding generational continuity (Lin et al. 2021).

Table 2. Number of Employees

Number of Employees	Frequency	Percentage
3 and below	9	56.25%
4–5 employees	4	25.00%
6 and above	3	18.75%
Total	**16**	**100%**

Table 2 reveals that the majority of the respondents employed 3 workers and below, with 9 out of 16 respondents or 56.25 percent. Four respondents or 25.00 percent had 4–5 employees, while only 3 respondents or 18.75 percent had 6 or more workers.

This result implies that bibingka and puto bumbong enterprises in Plaza Lucero were generally small-scale or micro-enterprise operations. The limited number of employees suggests that these businesses were likely family-managed or owner-operated. The preparation, cooking, selling, and customer service processes may have been handled directly by the owners and a small group of helpers.

An in-depth analysis shows that small workforce size can have both advantages and limitations. On one hand, direct owner involvement may help maintain product authenticity, consistency, and personal customer service. On the other hand, limited manpower may restrict production capacity, operating hours, service speed, and readiness to accommodate larger tourist demand(UNWTO (2024), (Philippine News Agency, 2025).

Table 3. Production Capacity per Day

Production Capacity per Day	Frequency	Percentage
50–100 pieces	5	31.25%
101–150 pieces	6	37.50%
151–200 pieces	4	25.00%
201 pieces and above	1	6.25%
Total	**16**	**100%**

Table 3 shows that the largest group of respondents produced 101–150 pieces of bibingka or puto bumbong per day, with 6 out of 16 respondents or 37.50 percent. This was followed by 5 respondents or 31.25 percent who produced 50–100 pieces per day. Only 1 respondent or 6.25 percent produced 201 pieces and above daily.

This result implies that most traditional rice cake enterprises had moderate production capacity. The businesses were capable of meeting regular local demand, but only a few had the capacity to produce at a higher volume. This indicates that production remained largely small-scale and may still depend on manual preparation, traditional cooking methods, and daily customer flow.

An in-depth analysis suggests that moderate production capacity is consistent with the nature of traditional rice cake preparation. Bibingka and puto bumbong are often valued because they are freshly made and traditionally prepared. However, limited production capacity may also become a challenge during peak seasons, festivals, religious events, or tourism-related activities (**Almansouri et al. 2022).**

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Table 4. Months of Operation per Year

Months of Operation per Year	Frequency	Percentage
6–8 months	3	18.75%
9–10 months	5	31.25%
11–12 months	8	50.00%
Total	**16**	**100%**

Table 4 shows that half of the respondents, or 8 out of 16 business owners, operated for 11–12 months per year. Five respondents or 31.25 percent operated for 9–10 months, while 3 respondents or 18.75 percent operated for only 6–8 months per year.

This result implies that many bibingka and puto bumbong businesses in Plaza Lucero were not limited to seasonal operation. Although these traditional rice cakes are commonly associated with the Christmas season and religious traditions, the data suggest that a significant number of enterprises operated almost year-round. This indicates that there is continuing local demand for these products beyond seasonal festivities.

An in-depth analysis shows that year-round operation strengthens the potential of bibingka and puto bumbong as culinary tourism products. If the products are available throughout most of the year, tourists and local visitors can experience them even outside the traditional Christmas season. However, the presence of enterprises operating for only 6–8 months also shows that seasonality remains a concern. This may be affected by demand fluctuations, ingredient availability, capital, weather, or location-based foot traffic.

This finding is supported by the Philippine Food and Gastronomy Tourism Strategic Framework and Roadmap 2024–2029, which promotes food circuits and culinary diversity as part of the tourism strategy. For traditional rice cakes to become stronger tourism products, they must be promoted not only as seasonal delicacies but also as year-round expressions of Filipino culinary heritage.

Perceived Contribution of Traditional Rice Cake Enterprises to Culinary Tourism Identity

Table 5. Preservation of Local Culinary Heritage

Statement	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
The enterprise preserves traditional recipes and preparation methods.	4.75	Strongly Agree
The business maintains the use of traditional ingredients.	4.62	Strongly Agree
The products reflect Filipino food heritage and local tradition.	4.69	Strongly Agree
The business helps younger generations become familiar with traditional rice cakes.	4.50	Strongly Agree
The enterprise contributes to the continuity of local food practices.	4.56	Strongly Agree
Overall Mean	**4.62**	**Strongly Agree**

Table 5 presents an overall weighted mean of 4.62, interpreted as Strongly Agree. The highest-rated statement was that the enterprise preserves traditional recipes and preparation methods, with a weighted mean of 4.75. The lowest-rated statement was that the business helps younger generations become familiar with traditional rice cakes, with a weighted mean of 4.50, although this was still interpreted as Strongly Agree.

This result implies that business owners strongly perceived their enterprises as important contributors to the preservation of local culinary heritage. Bibingka and puto bumbong were not seen merely as products for sale but as cultural food items that preserve traditional knowledge, preparation practices, and Filipino food identity.

An in-depth analysis suggests that the preservation of recipes and preparation methods is one of the strongest contributions of traditional rice cake enterprises. These practices allow the products to remain culturally meaningful and recognizable to the community. However, the relatively lower score regarding younger generations indicates that cultural transmission may still be improved. This may be addressed through cooking demonstrations, school-based cultural exposure, food festivals, and storytelling activities that allow younger people to understand the cultural value of bibingka and puto bumbong.

This finding is supported by UN Tourism, which explains that gastronomy reflects culture, heritage, traditions, and sense of community. Therefore, traditional rice cake enterprises contribute to culinary tourism identity because they preserve food practices that represent local and national culture.

Table 6. Uniqueness of Product Offerings

Statement	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
The products offer a distinct taste associated with traditional Filipino rice cakes.	4.56	Strongly Agree
The products help distinguish Plaza Lucero from other food destinations.	4.44	Strongly Agree
The preparation and presentation make the products attractive to customers.	4.38	Strongly Agree
The products provide a unique local food experience.	4.50	Strongly Agree
The enterprise offers products that can be promoted as part of Cabanatuan's culinary identity.	4.44	Strongly Agree
Overall Mean	**4.46**	**Strongly Agree**

Table 6 shows an overall weighted mean of 4.46, interpreted as Strongly Agree. The highest-rated statement was that the products offer a distinct taste associated with traditional Filipino rice cakes, with a weighted mean of 4.56. The lowest-rated statement was that the preparation and presentation make the products attractive to customers, with a weighted mean of 4.38.

This result implies that the respondents strongly believed that bibingka and puto bumbong had unique qualities that could help strengthen the culinary identity of Plaza Lucero. Their distinct taste, traditional preparation, and cultural association make them different from ordinary commercial food offerings.

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The result implies and shows that uniqueness is essential in culinary tourism because visitors often look for food products that provide a sense of place. Traditional rice cakes may help distinguish Plaza Lucero by offering a food experience connected to Filipino culture and local community life. However, the slightly lower score on presentation suggests that although the products are unique in taste and tradition, there is still room to improve their visual appeal, packaging, stall design, and product labeling.

This finding is supported by Recuero-Virto (2024), who found that local cuisine contributes to destination attractiveness, visitor experience, and regional identity, and by Mohamed (2024), who emphasized that food image can support destination brand building.

Table 7. Promotion of Local Culture and Traditions

Statement	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
The products promote Filipino food traditions.	4.69	Strongly Agree
The enterprise helps keep local food practices visible in the community.	4.56	Strongly Agree
The products are connected to Filipino celebrations and religious traditions.	4.75	Strongly Agree
The business contributes to the cultural atmosphere of Plaza Lucero.	4.50	Strongly Agree
The products can be used to promote local culture to visitors.	4.44	Strongly Agree
Overall Mean	**4.59**	**Strongly Agree**

Table 7 presents an overall weighted mean of 4.59, interpreted as Strongly Agree. The highest-rated statement was that the products are connected to Filipino celebrations and religious traditions, with a weighted mean of 4.75. The lowest-rated statement was that the products can be used to promote local culture to visitors, with a weighted mean of 4.44.

This result implies that business owners strongly recognized the cultural value of bibingka and puto bumbong. These products are closely associated with Filipino celebrations, family gatherings, religious practices, and community traditions. Their presence in Plaza Lucero contributes to the cultural character and atmosphere of the place.

An in-depth analysis suggests that traditional rice cake enterprises can serve as informal cultural promoters (Wondirad et al. 2021). Through their products, they communicate Filipino food traditions and maintain the visibility of traditional culinary practices in the community. However, the slightly lower rating on promoting culture to visitors suggests that cultural meaning may not always be clearly explained to tourists. Visitors may consume the products without fully understanding their history, symbolism, or connection to Filipino traditions.

This finding is supported by the Philippine gastronomy tourism roadmap, which highlights the development of food and gastronomy tourism segments and food circuits. Such policy direction supports the need to integrate cultural storytelling, local food promotion, and community-based food experiences into tourism planning.

Table 8. Attraction of Visitors and Tourists

Statement	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
The products encourage customers to visit Plaza Lucero.	4.31	Strongly Agree
The enterprise attracts repeat customers.	4.38	Strongly Agree
Visitors are interested in tasting traditional rice cakes.	4.44	Strongly Agree
The products contribute to tourist satisfaction.	4.50	Strongly Agree
The enterprise can become part of food tourism activities.	4.38	Strongly Agree
Overall Mean	**4.40**	**Strongly Agree**

Table 8 shows an overall weighted mean of 4.40, interpreted as Strongly Agree. The highest-rated statement was that the products contribute to tourist satisfaction, with a weighted mean of 4.50. The lowest-rated statement was that the products encourage customers to visit Plaza Lucero, with a weighted mean of 4.31.

This result implies that bibingka and puto bumbong businesses were perceived as capable of attracting visitors and improving the visitor experience in Plaza Lucero. The respondents believed that traditional rice cakes could contribute to customer satisfaction and repeat visits.

The results shows that food may not always be the primary reason for visiting a destination, but it can strongly enhance the overall experience. In this case, bibingka and puto bumbong may serve as complementary attractions that enrich a visitor's experience in Plaza Lucero. The lower rating on encouraging visits suggests that the products may need stronger promotion to become primary attractions. Food tourism activities, social media campaigns, local food trails, and festival integration may help increase visitor interest.

This finding is supported by Hurdawaty et al. (2025), who found that food authenticity and social media exposure influence revisit intention through memorable culinary tourism experience and destination image, and by Zhang et al. (2019), who found that authenticity and quality contribute to tourist satisfaction and loyalty.

Table 9. Enhancement of the City's Food Image

Statement	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
The products represent the culinary identity of Cabanatuan City.	4.56	Strongly Agree
The enterprises help improve the image of Plaza Lucero as a food destination.	4.44	Strongly Agree
The products contribute to the recognition of local food culture.	4.50	Strongly Agree
The business strengthens the city's image as a place with traditional food offerings.	4.44	Strongly Agree

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The products can be included in city tourism promotions.	4.50	Strongly Agree
Overall Mean	**4.49**	**Strongly Agree**

Table 9 shows an overall weighted mean of 4.49, interpreted as Strongly Agree. The highest-rated statement was that the products represent the culinary identity of Cabanatuan City, with a weighted mean of 4.56. The other statements also received high ratings, ranging from 4.44 to 4.50. This result implies that business owners strongly perceived bibingka and puto bumbong as products that enhance the food image of Cabanatuan City. The enterprises were viewed as contributors to local food recognition and as possible elements of city tourism promotion.

An in-depth analysis suggests that food image becomes stronger when a destination is associated with distinct and culturally meaningful food products. In Plaza Lucero, traditional rice cakes may help create a recognizable culinary image that links the place with Filipino heritage food. However, this potential requires branding, coordinated promotion, and inclusion in official tourism materials. This finding is supported by Mohamed (2024), who noted that food image is increasingly recognized as a source of destination brand building, and by Recuero-Virto (2024), who explained that local gastronomy reinforces regional identity and destination attractiveness.

Business Practices Implemented by Traditional Rice Cake Enterprises

Table 10. Product Authenticity

Statement	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
The enterprise uses traditional ingredients in preparing the products.	4.69	Strongly Agree
The business maintains traditional cooking or preparation methods.	4.75	Strongly Agree
The products retain their original taste and cultural character.	4.62	Strongly Agree
The owner personally monitors product preparation.	4.56	Strongly Agree
The business avoids excessive changes that may affect authenticity.	4.50	Strongly Agree
Overall Mean	**4.62**	**Strongly Agree**

Table 10 presents an overall weighted mean of 4.62, interpreted as Strongly Agree. The highest-rated statement was that the business maintains traditional cooking or preparation methods, with a weighted mean of 4.75. The lowest-rated statement was that the business avoids excessive changes that may affect authenticity, with a weighted mean of 4.50.

This result implies that product authenticity was strongly maintained by the traditional rice cake enterprises. Business owners valued traditional ingredients, cooking methods, original taste, and personal monitoring of preparation. These practices help preserve the cultural character of bibingka and puto bumbong.

An in-depth analysis shows that authenticity is a major strength of these enterprises. In culinary tourism, visitors often seek food experiences that are genuine, local, and culturally rooted. Maintaining traditional preparation methods helps protect the identity of the product and strengthens its tourism value. However, authenticity should be balanced with improvements in sanitation, packaging, and promotion to ensure market readiness without compromising traditional value. This finding is supported by Zhang et al. (2019), who found that local food authenticity positively affects quality perception, satisfaction, and tourist loyalty, and by Yin et al. (2021), whose meta-analysis showed that authenticity is positively associated with tourist loyalty.

Table 11. Quality

Statement	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
The enterprise maintains consistency in product taste.	4.50	Strongly Agree
The business observes cleanliness in food preparation.	4.56	Strongly Agree
The products are served fresh to customers.	4.69	Strongly Agree
The business responds to customer feedback.	4.38	Strongly Agree
The enterprise ensures that ingredients are properly selected.	4.44	Strongly Agree
Overall Mean	**4.51**	**Strongly Agree**

Table 11 shows an overall weighted mean of 4.51, interpreted as Strongly Agree. The highest-rated statement was that the products are served fresh to customers, with a weighted mean of 4.69. The lowest-rated statement was that the business responds to customer feedback, with a weighted mean of 4.38.

This result implies that business owners strongly practiced quality maintenance, especially in terms of freshness, cleanliness, taste consistency, and ingredient selection. These factors are important because food quality directly affects customer satisfaction and repeat patronage.

The result suggests that freshness is one of the strongest qualities of bibingka and puto bumbong enterprises. Since these products are usually prepared and served hot, customers are able to experience their sensory quality immediately. However, the lower score on customer feedback suggests that feedback practices may still be informal and may need to be systematized. This finding is supported by Zhang et al. (2019), who emphasized that authenticity improves perceived quality and tourist satisfaction, and by Almansouri et al. (2022), who identified quality and authenticity as important concerns in heritage food production.

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Table 12. Competitiveness in the Local Market

Statement	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
The enterprise offers products at reasonable prices.	4.38	Strongly Agree
The business maintains customer loyalty.	4.44	Strongly Agree
The enterprise adapts to customer preferences.	4.31	Strongly Agree
The products compete well with other local food offerings.	4.38	Strongly Agree
The business uses simple promotional strategies to attract customers.	4.25	Strongly Agree
Overall Mean	**4.35**	**Strongly Agree**

Table 12 shows an overall weighted mean of 4.35, interpreted as Strongly Agree. The highest-rated statement was that the business maintains customer loyalty, with a weighted mean of 4.44. The lowest-rated statement was that the business uses simple promotional strategies to attract customers, with a weighted mean of 4.25.

This result implies that traditional rice cake enterprises were competitive in the local market, particularly because of customer loyalty, reasonable pricing, and product familiarity. However, promotional strategies appeared to be less developed compared with other competitiveness practices.

This shows that long-standing food enterprises often rely on word-of-mouth promotion and loyal customers. While this is useful for sustaining local sales, it may not be enough for tourism development.

Tourism competitiveness requires stronger branding, social media presence, visual presentation, product storytelling, and participation in tourism events. This finding is supported by the Philippine News Agency (2025), which reported that the Philippine gastronomy roadmap includes food circuits, curated travel routes, and food tourism segments such as market tours, and by Recuero-Virto (2024), who emphasized that regional food can support branding, growth, and visitor experience.

Challenges Encountered by Business Owners

Table 13. Challenges in Sustaining and Promoting Traditional Rice Cake Enterprises

Statement	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Limited capital affects business improvement.	4.25	Highly Encountered
Seasonal demand affects sales stability.	4.38	Highly Encountered
Increasing cost of ingredients affects profitability.	4.44	Highly Encountered
Limited marketing support affects product promotion.	4.31	Highly Encountered
Lack of modern equipment limits production capacity.	4.19	Encountered
Limited access to training affects business development.	4.13	Encountered
Competition with other food products affects sales.	4.06	Encountered
Weather conditions affect daily selling activities.	4.00	Encountered
Lack of organized food tourism activities limits visitor reach.	4.25	Highly Encountered
Limited assistance from concerned agencies affects growth.	4.19	Encountered
Overall Mean	**4.22**	**Highly Encountered**

Table 13 presents an overall weighted mean of 4.22, interpreted as Highly Encountered. The highest-rated challenge was the increasing cost of ingredients, with a weighted mean of 4.44. This was followed by seasonal demand, with a weighted mean of 4.38, and limited marketing support, with a weighted mean of 4.31. The lowest-rated challenge was weather conditions, with a weighted mean of 4.00, although this was still interpreted as Encountered.

This result implies that business owners experienced several significant challenges in sustaining and promoting their products as part of Plaza Lucero's culinary tourism identity. The most serious concerns were economic and promotional in nature, particularly rising ingredient costs, unstable seasonal demand, limited capital, weak marketing support, and lack of organized food tourism activities.

It shows that these challenges may limit the ability of traditional rice cake enterprises to grow as tourism-oriented businesses. Rising ingredient costs can reduce profit margins and affect pricing decisions. Seasonal demand can create unstable income. Limited marketing support can prevent the products from reaching wider markets. The lack of organized food tourism activities also suggests that these enterprises are not yet fully integrated into the city's tourism planning. These concerns highlight the need for coordinated support from local government, tourism officers, and business development agencies.

This finding is supported by the direction of the Philippine gastronomy tourism roadmap, which emphasizes the need for food circuits, local government participation, and curated travel routes highlighting culinary diversity and local produce (Wondirad et al. 2021). The result suggests that Plaza Lucero's traditional rice cake enterprises require structured support to become stronger contributors to culinary tourism development.

Culinary Tourism Development Plan Matrix – Plaza Lucero, Cabanatuan City, Philippines

Focus Area	Strategies/Activities	Expected Outcomes	Supporting Rationale
Cultural Heritage & Product Authenticity	Maintain traditional recipes and ingredients; heritage labeling; cooking demonstrations	Preserve local culinary heritage; educate tourists; strengthen cultural identity	Respondents strongly valued authenticity (WM=4.62); UNWTO emphasizes gastronomy as a cultural tourism asset

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Product Quality & Service	Hygiene and food safety training; standardized presentation; customer feedback system	Improve food quality; enhance tourist satisfaction; ensure consistent visitor experience	Findings showed high but variable quality (WM=4.51); quality directly affects satisfaction and repeat patronage
Marketing & Promotion	Integrate vendors in food circuits; digital marketing; collaborative Plaza Lucero branding	Increase tourist awareness; attract visitors; enhance city culinary image	Vendors showed moderate promotion efforts (WM=4.35); branding and visibility strengthen destination identity
Capacity Building & Business Support	Microloans and financing; workforce training; shared equipment/facilities	Expand production capacity; improve competitiveness; sustain businesses	Challenges in capital, workforce, and production reported (WM=4.22); support ensures sustainability
Tourism Integration & Event Support	Include stalls in festivals; culinary competitions; interactive tasting experiences	Enhance visitor engagement; strengthen culinary tourism; boost repeat visits	Visitor attraction and satisfaction linked to product experience (WM=4.40); interactive experiences reinforce tourism identity
Monitoring & Evaluation	Tourist satisfaction surveys; vendor performance tracking; annual review with DOT alignment	Ensure continuous improvement; maintain policy alignment; adapt plan based on feedback	Continuous monitoring is essential for long-term sustainability and effectiveness

The matrix organizes the Culinary Tourism Development Plan into six focus areas, each addressing specific findings from the study. Cultural Heritage and Product Authenticity activities aim to preserve traditional practices, reflecting respondents' emphasis on maintaining authentic preparation methods. Product Quality & Service measures ensure that tourists experience consistent taste, hygiene, and presentation, which are critical for visitor satisfaction. Marketing & Promotion strategies target visibility and branding, addressing the moderate promotion efforts reported by vendors. Capacity Building & Business Support provides mechanisms to overcome capital, workforce, and production limitations. Tourism Integration & Event Support enhances the visitor experience by incorporating food into festivals and interactive activities, directly responding to the need for stronger tourist engagement. Monitoring & Evaluation ensures the plan's effectiveness over time, allowing for adjustments based on feedback and policy alignment.

This matrix provides a concise, actionable framework that links study findings to strategic interventions, enhancing the culinary tourism identity of Plaza Lucero while supporting traditional rice cake enterprises.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that traditional rice cake enterprises, particularly bibingka and puto bumbong businesses, contribute significantly to the culinary tourism identity of Plaza Lucero, Cabanatuan City, Philippines. The profile of the respondents showed that most of the enterprises were long-established, small-scale businesses with moderate production capacity and mostly year-round operations. These characteristics indicate that bibingka and puto bumbong enterprises have maintained their relevance in the local food environment and have become part of the community's culinary identity over time.

The findings also revealed that the respondents strongly perceived their enterprises as contributors to the preservation of local culinary heritage, uniqueness of product offerings, promotion of local culture and traditions, attraction of visitors and tourists, and enhancement of the city's food image. This suggests that bibingka and puto bumbong are not merely food products sold for income generation but are also cultural assets that represent Filipino heritage, local traditions, and community-based culinary practices. Their continued presence in Plaza Lucero strengthens the area's identity as a place where traditional food culture remains visible and meaningful.

In terms of business practices, the study concluded that the enterprises strongly maintained product authenticity, quality, and competitiveness. Traditional ingredients, traditional cooking methods, freshness, cleanliness, reasonable pricing, and customer loyalty were identified as important strengths of the businesses. These practices help preserve the cultural value of bibingka and puto bumbong while also supporting customer satisfaction and market sustainability.

However, the study also found that business owners encountered several challenges in sustaining and promoting their products. These included rising ingredient costs, seasonal demand fluctuations, limited marketing support, limited capital, lack of modern equipment, and insufficient integration into organized food tourism activities. These challenges may limit the capacity of traditional rice cake enterprises to fully maximize their contribution to culinary tourism development.

Overall, the study concluded that Plaza Lucero has strong potential to be promoted as a culinary tourism site through its bibingka and puto bumbong enterprises. However, this potential can be strengthened through a structured Culinary Tourism Development Plan that focuses on cultural preservation, product quality improvement, marketing support, capacity building, tourism integration, and continuous monitoring. Through coordinated efforts among business owners, the local government, tourism officers, and community stakeholders, traditional rice cake enterprises can become stronger contributors to the culinary tourism identity of Cabanatuan City.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are proposed.

First, traditional rice cake business owners should continue preserving the authenticity of bibingka and puto bumbong by maintaining traditional recipes, ingredients, and preparation methods. Since the findings showed that authenticity and cultural preservation were among the strongest contributions of these enterprises, business owners should document their traditional practices and ensure that these are passed on to younger

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family members or future entrepreneurs. Cultural storytelling, heritage labeling, and cooking demonstrations may also be used to help customers and tourists understand the cultural meaning of the products.

Second, the Local Government Unit of Cabanatuan City and the local tourism office should integrate bibingka and puto bumbong enterprises into local tourism programs, food fairs, festivals, and promotional campaigns. The city may develop a Plaza Lucero culinary trail or traditional rice cake food circuit to highlight these enterprises as part of the local tourism experience. This can strengthen the visibility of Plaza Lucero as a culinary tourism destination and support the city's food image.

Third, product quality and service delivery should be improved through training on food safety, sanitation, product presentation, customer service, and proper food handling. Although the respondents strongly practiced quality maintenance, continuous improvement is necessary to meet the expectations of both local customers and visitors. Simple customer feedback systems may also be introduced to help business owners identify areas for improvement.

Fourth, marketing and promotional support should be provided to the enterprises. Since limited marketing support was identified as one of the major challenges, business owners should be trained in basic digital marketing, social media promotion, product photography, and customer engagement. A unified branding strategy for Plaza Lucero's bibingka and puto bumbong businesses may also be developed to make the products more recognizable and attractive to tourists.

Fifth, capacity-building and business support programs should be implemented to help business owners address operational limitations. Access to microfinance, shared equipment, improved vending spaces, and basic business management training may help improve production capacity, competitiveness, and sustainability. These interventions can support small-scale enterprises while preserving the traditional character of their products.

Sixth, the local tourism office should organize food-related activities that feature bibingka and puto bumbong, such as cooking demonstrations, tasting events, food competitions, cultural exhibits, and festival booths. These activities can enhance visitor experience, promote cultural appreciation, and position traditional rice cakes as important culinary tourism products of Plaza Lucero.

Seventh, monitoring and evaluation should be conducted regularly to assess the effectiveness of the proposed Culinary Tourism Development Plan. Tourist satisfaction, vendor participation, product quality, sales performance, and promotional reach may be monitored to determine whether the plan is achieving its intended outcomes. The results of the evaluation may be used to improve future tourism programs and business support initiatives.

Finally, future researchers are encouraged to expand the scope of the study by including tourists, customers, local government officials, tourism officers, and other food vendors as respondents. Future studies may also examine tourist satisfaction, customer loyalty, digital marketing effectiveness, economic contribution, and the feasibility of developing Plaza Lucero as a recognized culinary tourism hub in Cabanatuan City.

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