

## **BAHULU ATTRACTION - WHAT IS EXPECTED OF BAHULU AS A TOURISM PRODUCT?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study questions whether bahulu, as an example of traditional food, can be marketed as a successful tourism product. To answer this question, the study explores tourists' food expectations when bahulu is treated as regular food, and when it is treated as a tourism product. From analyses of in-depth interview transcriptions with 22 willing tourists, the study found that food quality (objective and subjective/perceived) emerged as a top expectation in both cases. The study also managed to identify three components of food quality: sensory, functional, and symbolic components as specific aspects of bahulu as well as the peripherals that can be considered to add value to the attractiveness of the food as a tourism product.*

**Keywords:** *Bahulu*, traditional food, value-added product, marketing attraction, tourist consumer's consumption experience, Malaysia

### **INTRODUCTION**

The potential growth of food tourism is widely acknowledged as food consumption is generally recognised as a collection of contextual and evolving social practices. Food used to be considered only to serve as sustenance, but it is now portrayed as a way for people to relate to one another in social, cultural, and political terms (Oosterveer, 2006). The wide coverage by media, social media, and globalisation on food subjects are amongst the influencing factors acknowledged for the continuing growth of food consumption and tourism. In the context of food tourism, food consumption can be 'symbolically' significant to tourists to mark particular social distinction (Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2010; Kim, Eves, & Scarles, 2009), or as golden opportunity for encountering and experiencing new/novel food, other foodways, and cultures (Chang et al., 2010; Molz, 2007). This is in addition to food being an 'obligatory' tourist activity as the body cannot function without it (Richards, 2002). In fact, food when consumed while travelling represents a unique form of tourist activity in itself as the experience captures all of the tourist's five senses – vision, tactile, auditory, taste, and olfaction (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). The achievement of 'sensory pleasure' helps to fulfil the 'experiential' part of the tourism experience (Hjalager & Richards, 2002).

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From the tourist product/attraction perspective, food can be viewed either as a promising 'attraction' (Hjalager & Richards, 2002) or a potential 'impediment' to discourage tourists to visit a destination (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). The conflicting views on food in tourism are most probably due to the different emphasis placed on both its 'symbolic' importance and 'obligatory' nature (Richards, 2002). Sampling local food never tasted before (food novelty), for example, can be the main motivation for a tourist to travel to a destination (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). However, the unfamiliar food and alien foodways found in destination may also encourage tourists to seek for some form or degree of familiarity ('environmental bubble' as Cohen (1972) terms it) (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). No matter what, for many tourists, the essential part of their tourist experience involves consuming local delicacies and participating in local foodways. In Chang et al.'s (2010) study, for instance, 'core' food preference was found to be dominant for tourists who are enthusiastic to sample local food; implying the existence of 'the tourist paradox' whereby tourists desire to seek both novelty and familiarity in their food consumption experience. Such instances can be true for experiences involving both foreign and domestic tourists.

In Malaysia's case, tourism's significant influence on the country's economic growth is quite transparent as it became Malaysia's 6<sup>th</sup> biggest contributor in 2013. While its importance to the country's economic growth is acknowledged, whether Malaysia's traditional and heritage food (MHF) can be treated as part of Malaysia's tourism attraction is an issue in itself. For example, Omar et al. (2011) noted the view by Hall and Mitchell (2000) on how "tourism plays a role to reinforce local food identity and production". It is important to find ways of how MHF can be preserved and cherished to ensure that they are not forgotten by the new generation or left unnoticed by non-locals like tourists.

Although the government through the National Heritage Department has taken the effort to recognise Malaysia's heritage food by publishing a list of 100 MHF in 2005 which consists of varieties of food ranging from rice, noodles, porridge, side dishes, cracker/snacks, sauce/*ulam*, drinks and local cakes, the concerns on whether they can survive the future generation in terms of special cooking techniques and presentation skills and the confusion on the originality and authenticity of MHF caused by globalisation have been raised (Omar, Ab. Karim, & Omar, 2015). A study by Omar et al. (2011) found that the main reason consumers consume *keropok lekor* (fish snack), a traditional food in Malaysia is due to its taste; and that the food's flavour can be improved further with a touch of black pepper in it. This shows the importance of maintaining food quality. However, the country's traditional and heritage food is plagued by food quality problems (Abdul Wahid, 2009; Omar et al., 2015). As Omar et al. (2015) explained, the "multiple versions, uneven quality and inconsistency" of MHF affect the tourist's perception of the food as well as the country's image.

*Bahulu* represents a good case of MHF to be studied further. While Abdul Wahid (2009) recognised *bahulu*'s potential as MHF tourism product, she also argues that food quality is one of the strategic factors that may hinder the food's potential as MHF's tourism attraction. With *bahulu*'s popularity as the top ten traditional snack food sold in the marketplace is acknowledged (FAMA, 2009), local study on *bahulu* identified the food's objective

quality problematic when perception gaps were found on the sensory, functional, and symbolic components of quality between *bahulu* producers and customers (Abdul Wahid & Mudor, 2009). In addition, Haron et al. (2010) study on this food product found other issues which are closely related with branding, labeling, and packaging. As they observed, majority of micro *bahulu* producers in Malaysia consist of ‘orang lama’ (veterans or the elderly) who continue to produce *bahulu* the traditional way, which shows that their thinking follow the inside-out concept rather than outside-in (quote: “*pemikiran mereka yang masih berpaksikan pemikiran ‘dalam keluar’ (inside-out) dan bukannya ‘luar ke dalam’ (outside-in) walaupun mereka mengatakan bahawa pengguna adalah keutamaan mereka*”). This observation is similar to the ones shared by Omar et al. (2011) in the production of *keropok lekor*.

In line with the issues, this study attempts to explore whether *bahulu* as a good example of Malaysia’s traditional food, has the potential to be marketed as a tourism product. The food’s potential is investigated by exploring tourists’ expectations of the food when *bahulu* is treated as (normal or regular) food, and when it is treated or perceived as a tourism product. The findings will be significant to help identify whether *bahulu* has the ability to survive possible extinction from modern generations and to expand its function from only a traditional food into a tourism product.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

For a destination lacking in conventional natural and cultural tourism assets particularly for those without the 3S – sun, sea, and sand strengths; food tourism can be used as the creative strategy to market the location (Teo & Chang, 2000). The idea that local, traditional food products to be promoted as the marketing tool to attract tourists (Abdul Wahid, 2009; Meethan, 2001; Sims, 2009) is a saleable concept as these foods reflect the identity and culture of a country, a region, and its people (Chang et al., 2010; Delamont, 1994; Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Molz, 2007; Smith & Costello, 2009; Travel Industry Association, 2007).

The importance of food as an influence over a tourist’s destination choices has been acknowledged in many studies. For example, studies found that tourists choose a destination based on their interest in and preferences for food in that destination (Bessiere, 1998; Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Hall & Mitchell, 2000; Hall & Sharples, 2003; Hjalager & Richards, 2002; Long, 2004). Its influence over a tourist’s evaluation on destination attraction has also been acknowledged. Hu and Ritchie (1993) for instance found that tourists ranked food in fourth position when asked to evaluate a destination as an attractive place. Similarly, Yuksel (2001) also found food to be a tourist’s prime reference motive to visit Turkey as well as a factor affecting visit satisfaction.

According to Du Rand and Heath (2006), food tourism is unique as it fulfils tourists’ destination experiences, providing them with niche or alternative tourism not provided elsewhere. Food consumption provides tourists with opportunity to encounter and

experience new (novel) and/or familiar food, foodways, and cultures (Chang et al., 2010; Molz, 2007). Their quest for achieving 'sensory pleasure' (Hjalager & Richards, 2002) particularly in regards to vision, tactile, auditory, taste, and olfaction senses (Kivela & Crofts, 2006) in food tourism are beneficial for local food producers. As Meethan (2001) argues, the local food producers can add value to their products by creating a tourism experience around the raw materials of a region. By doing so, tourists enhance their travel or niche experience simply by connecting themselves to the region and its perceived culture and heritage (Sims, 2009). In such experience, tourists can undergo a process of socialization or resocialization with the culturally distinct food choice sampled, particularly in their participation of a known or new cultural practices (e.g. local rituals), and emerge from that experience with new beliefs (e.g. accepting the local symbolism) (Fox, 2007).

The noticeable problem, however, is that both the expectation and evaluation of local food consumption experience can be subjective, and thus, can be easily found to differ from one person to another. As an example, food evaluation can be made in various ways like judging the food's objective quality (Abdul Wahid & Mudor, 2009; Steenkamp, 1993; Wierenga, 1983), expressed body language/bodily involvement (Cohen & Avieli, 2004), and other factors like prior knowledge (Chang et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2009; Sims, 2009). Therefore, to gain consensus on the quality of the food remains quite an impossible task. This is mainly because local producers apply their own technical specification and expertise when making an evaluation while tourists use their own set of criteria, which can be controllable (e.g. food taste and physical appearance) and/or uncontrollable (e.g. tourist's neophobic attitude to the food).

As Abdul Wahid and Mudor's (2009) explained, a difference in food evaluation perception can cause traditional food producers, who are normally made of micro and small entrepreneurs, to lose potential customers as well as sales. Their study indeed revealed a perception gap between *bahulu* producers and customers when evaluating *bahulu*'s objective quality for which the *bahulu* producers were found to perceive their food better than their customers do. Both parties were also found to differ in their evaluation of food attributes or importance of quality in terms of the sensory, functional and symbolic aspects. For example, while *bahulu* producers co-ranked freshness and aroma as most important attributes for the food, the customers chose cleanliness as top priority in the sensory aspect. What is noticeable in their study is that customers bring their own expectations about food and their evaluation about its quality mainly depends on that pre-set expectation.

According to Wierenga (1983) and Steenkamp (1993), an individual's objective evaluation of food quality is very much hedonic/sensory-related (which deals with the pleasure of eating); commodity/functional-related (which relates to the function the food brings like health benefit that is associated with eating of the food); and/or expressive/symbolic-related (when the food attributes are linked very much to status, brand, and exclusiveness). Food-related studies were found to focus more on the sensory aspect than the other two. For example, Kremer, Mojet and Kroeze's (2007) study found that older consumers prefer their waffle's texture differently from the young consumers, while Hetherington, Bell

and Roll's (2000) study revealed that different tastes of snack foods (salty versus sweet) affected consumers differently as well. However, Masson, Aurier and D'Hauteville (2008) stressed the importance of non-sensory cues which are used more often to evaluate product quality and to decide product choice based on available alternatives.

As for Malaysia's traditional food, the number of studies found on this subject is limited. In one of the few studies on this subject, the qualitative findings of Omar, Ab. Karim and Omar (2015) showed that tourists' attitude and perception are mainly influenced by psychological (knowledge of heritage food; belief, culture, and value; recommendations from family and friends; health and nutritional benefits), physiological (to satisfy hunger; and food-related personality traits like neophilic, neophobic, and variety seeking), and food in the tourism destination (availability of food) factors. Importantly, their study found that majority of tourists they interviewed show positive attitude towards MHF's neophilic traits (love to experience new food). However, the importance of the health aspect when consuming food, particularly its freshness, quality, and nutritious value, are also emphasized by their eight respondents.

While many schools of thought are found in the literature on food consumption and food tourism, one popular school of thought views food as a tourist product/attraction. The school's proponents like Hjalager and Richards (2002) argued that food and gastronomic products can be utilised as a source of tourist product or attraction, usually by adopting a destination marketer's perspective. Thus, like earlier presented, food tourism can be a creative way to market a destination that lacks tourism-related assets. In places like this, focusing to market other available assets like promoting on local or traditional food which can be associated with the destination can be the attractive 'pull' factor for tourists to the location. To make the food 'symbolic' and marketable for food tourism, the food should be associated with a cultural story or stories of the destination or region. By doing so, the location of 'nothing' can now be turned into 'something' culturally interesting for (food) tourism purposes. This is in line with cultural capital theory.

According to cultural capital theory, cultural capital is viewed as a stock of knowledge and experience that people acquire through the course of their lives. As Bourdieu (1984) explained, those with more cultural capital will succeed more than others that have less. The capital which consists of three states, specifically, the embodied state (the knowledge and skills possessed by an individual), the objectified state (expressed in a form of cultural goods), and the institutionalised state (represented by actual documents and other proof of cultural status) helps individuals to interpret various cultural codes, and to impart their point of views regarding certain topics within the cultural group (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

For food consumption in tourism and food tourism, the embodied state is probably the most relevant when studies have reported that tourists consume local food to add to their knowledge about the food, how it is eaten, and the associated culture (Chang et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2009). The specialty of traditional food that links itself with a country's or community's heritage feature for instance can motivate and attract tourists, be it

domestic or foreign, to destinations to fulfil their desire to participate in such unique food consumption experience. The participation can include sampling the food, to watch with their own eyes the process of making the food, as well as actively participate in making the food themselves with guidance from the food producers. While these experiences may skip the foreigners, still, sometimes these are not known even to local people. As such, these people become domestic tourists and travel to local destinations to find the sites that can provide them with such opportunity that they seek.

Bessiere's (1998) review of the social anthropological analyses made on food in the literature concludes that "man feeds on nutrients" as well as on "signs, symbols, dreams and on imagination" that comes with food. In other words, a food eater can either become the food she/he consumes or choose to become a part of a determined culture within a social universe made up of food hygiene, nutrition, and symbolistic characters. In the context of local or traditional food tourism, food which can be made to symbolise tourist fantasy, communion, marker of a lifestyle, or an emblem to a community's heritage may be the reasons they behave the way they do, or behave the way they are taught they should be (in terms of novel food and foodways), or they recreate behaviour that they used to have in the past (e.g. from their memories of their past). For example, when a person lives and eats according to modern lifestyle (e.g. the opposite of traditional eating habits like random snacking, eating on junk and processed food), the opportunity to experience traditional food can lead them to certain behaviour (e.g. liking the new, different or familiar food). The accumulation of new knowledge or memory from the past takes place, linking him/her to a country's touch or natural ingredients, or fresh from the farm produce, or from inherited secret family recipes.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Note that this study was based on a much larger scope of investigation covering many objectives. However, for the purpose of writing this article, the scope will cover only the objectives stated in the paper.

### **Qualitative Approach and In-depth Interview**

The study employed a qualitative approach using interviews following recommendations in the literature regarding the technique's suitability in achieving the study's objectives. As suggested, interview allows researchers to explore and probe deeper into respondent's thoughts and opinions on the meanings they attach to issues and phenomenon investigated (Kim et al., 2009).

### **Sampling and Purposive Sampling**

Purposive sampling method was used to recruit respondents for this study. According to Tedlie and Yu (2007), purposive sampling technique is defined as "selecting units (individuals, groups of individuals, institutions) based on specific purposes associated

with answering a research study's questions". As per its definition, purposive sampling is in general designed to generate a sample that will answer the research questions. The rationale for selecting samples this way is because the sample can help address specific purposes related to the research questions and that researchers only choose those they can learn the most from (Tedlie & Yu, 2007).

The study targeted only tourists who were available at the specific *bahulu* food production sites during the investigation period. In addition to the tourist's willingness to participate in the study, only those people who can communicate in English, Bahasa Malaysia/Bahasa Melayu or combined and who can spend time of about half to one hour to be interviewed, were selected. With the pre-set requirements, the study managed to recruit 22 respondents.

### **Traditional Food/MHF selection**

The choice of *bahulu* to represent traditional food or MHF was made based on three factors: its popularity as noted by Abdul Wahid and Mudor's (2009) and the media. Googling the word '*bahulu*' produced at least 339,000 hits as of 11 December, 2014.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Six *bahulu* production sites in Kedah, Penang, Perlis, and Perak visited by tourists during public holidays became the locations from which in-depth interviews were conducted with tourists. Data for the study were collected based on the list of semi-structured interview questions already prepared in the interview guide whereby the tourists were expected to respond to a few open-ended questions. The interview guide had been designed to be in line with the study's intention to explore whether *bahulu*, as an example of traditional food can be marketed as a successful tourism product by investigating tourists expectations of the product. With such structure, on average, interviews took around 25 minutes to an hour to complete. Data of each interview were digitally recorded using video and tape recorder. Transcription data of the 22 interviews were analyzed by scrutinizing and categorizing the emerging themes of the interview contents or texts recorded which were matched to the reflective journaling that had been carried out right after each interview was over. Commonalities within the transcripts were identified to help the process of thematic review.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Interviewee's Demographic Profile**

From the 22 interviewees' demographic description shown in Table 1, the analyses reveal quite an equal distribution for gender (12 females, 10 males) while age extended as far as from below 25 to over 55 years. All of the interviewees showed good educational backgrounds which secured them with various occupations. They were dominated by domestic tourists who hailed from various states in Malaysia like Johor, Kedah, Perak,

Sabah, Perlis, Penang, Selangor, and Melaka. Only one of them was a foreign tourist who came from Singapore. Majority of the interviewees were married and from the Malay ethnic group.

All interviewees admitted that they had experienced many other Malaysian traditional foods apart from the one that they seek during the period of study particularly the popular ones which include a variety of local cakes, rice, noodles, bread/wheat, porridge, sweets, and drinks. This was expected because the interviewees were made up mostly of domestic tourists, and the sole foreign tourist who came from Singapore also shares similar food culture as Singapore is Malaysia's closest neighbour and used to be a part of Malaysia.

**Table 1: Profile of Respondents**

No.	Sex	Status	Age	Ethnicity	Education	Occupation	Home State
<b>Production site 1: Kedah</b>							
1	F	Married	35-44	Malay	First degree	Engineer	Kedah, Malaysia
2	F	Married	35-44	Malay	First degree	Govt. officer	Perlis, Malaysia
3	F	Married	25-34	Malay	First degree	HR Executive	Penang, Malaysia
4	F	Married	25-34	Malay	First degree	Medical officer	Perlis, Malaysia
5	M	Married	45-54	Malay	PhD	Lecturer	Penang, Malaysia
6	F	Not married	35-44	Kadazan	First degree	Govt officer	Sabah, Malaysia
<b>Production site 2: Kedah</b>							
7	F	Not married	25-34	Chinese	First degree	Sales executive	Penang, Malaysia
8	F	Not married	55 and above	Chinese	Master degree	Manager (own business)	Singapore
9	M	Married	25-34	Malay	Diploma	Manager (own business)	Johor, Malaysia
10	M	Married	55 and above	Malay	Master degree	Manager (own business)	Melaka, Malaysia
11	M	Married	55 and above	Indian	First degree	Medical Doctor	Penang, Malaysia
<b>Production site 3: Penang</b>							
12	F	Married	55 and above	Malay	First degree	Housewife	Selangor, Malaysia
13	F	Married	55 and above	Chinese	Diploma	Retiree	Selangor, Malaysia
14	M	Married	45-54	Chinese	Master degree	School Teacher	Selangor, Malaysia
<b>Production site 4: Penang</b>							
15	M	Married	35-44	Malay	First degree	School Teacher	Penang, Malaysia
16	M	Married	35-44	Malay	First degree	School Teacher	Perak, Malaysia
<b>Production site 5: Perlis</b>							
17	F	Married	45-54	Malay	First degree	School Teacher	Perak, Malaysia
18	F	Married	45-54	Malay	First degree	School Teacher	Penang, Malaysia
19	F	Married	Below 25	Malay	First degree	School Teacher	Penang, Malaysia
<b>Production site 6: Perak</b>							
20	M	Not married	Below 25	Malay	First degree	School Teacher	Kedah, Malaysia
21	M	Not married	Below 25	Malay	First degree	School Teacher	Kedah, Malaysia
22	M	Married	25-34	Malay	First degree	School Teacher	Johor, Malaysia



### **Expectation on *Bahulu***

For this purpose, two questions had been asked although other related questions may also emerge as a result of the dialogue and interactions that happened between the researchers and interviewees because these sub-questions may help the researchers to probe further into the interviewee's responses (e.g. when the initial response was vague). The first one asked, "What kind of expectations do you have in mind about *bahulu* as a food product?" while the second one extended the first question further with: "What kind of expectations do you have in mind about *bahulu* as a tourism product from your perspective as a tourist visiting this production site?" Interviewees were asked to elaborate their points for this purpose.

### **Expectation on *Bahulu* as a Food Product**

It is interesting to find some similarities to Abdul Wahid and Mudor's (2009) study findings as tourists' expectations on *bahulu* were built mainly on food quality. Analyses made on the responses to the first question found all three components of the food's objective quality present in tourists' expectations (i.e. sensory, functional, and symbolic).

The sensory component only identified six specific *bahulu* attributes (i.e. taste, smell, colour, texture, freshness, and shape/form) which were also included in the nine attributes investigated in Abdul Wahid and Mudor's (2009) study. However, expectations to be provided with the six sensory-related attributes were shared by the majority of the interviewees, particularly when it comes to the taste, smell, freshness, shape, and colour of the product. These can be seen from the following selected excerpts:

"*Bahulu* should be (the) *bahulu* that I know of. ...must be golden yellow, smells great, spongy, fresh from the oven... delicious." (IR 1).

"...*Bahulu* is not the traditional *bahulu* if it is not in *cermai* shape..." (IR 5).

"I don't expect to get *bahulu* that is a year old... that would be foolish of me coming here. My first priority would be [*bahulu* that is] fresh, fresh, fresh and tasty... and supposed to be as excellent as what I heard it should be" (IR 11).

"...I don't want *bahulu* that is too sweet... full of sugar... will affect its texture [as it will be easily] hardened when left [in the open] for some time. You can see the sugar particles on the [hardened] *bahulu*... it affects the taste [of the food]. If you eat [*bahulu*] in that condition, you will find crumbs all over your hands and body. You don't want that... Of course I have to watch my health. Too sweet is not good for me or in fact for anyone *pun*." (IR 2).

As for the functional component, the study managed to identify at least two themes that are related to tourist's health and digestible size.

“...I am diabetic... I don’t want *bahulu* that is too sweet... full of sugar... should *jaga* [take care of] your health, man...” (IR 9).

“... Of course I have to watch my health. Too sweet is not good for me or in fact for anyone *pun*.” (IR 2).

“Must be *comel-comel* (small, petite) so [that it is] easy to eat [due to digestible size]” (IR 16).

Interestingly, tourists’ expectation was also found to be built on subjective or perceived food quality which is difficult to comprehend by *bahulu* producers alike because they are vaguely described. Examples for these include:

“*bahulu* like my grandmother’s” (referring to *bahulu*’s taste, texture, freshness, and smell) (IR 15).

“as delicious as what Uncle X [name withheld, he’s a homestay owner that brought this interviewee to the *bahulu* production site] said it would be” (IR21).

“*bahulu* worthy of my time [spent visiting this location]” (IR 8).

“*Bahulu* should be (the) *bahulu* that I know of. ...” (IR 1).

The kind and level of quality expected by these could never have been known unless one knows the story or stories that can be associated with the interviewees’ experiences with the food. What can be seen from the responses is that tourists do recognise *bahulu*’s specialty, on which the food quality that they expected falls implicitly on the traditional nature it is linked to. However, as noted in the literature, while tourists look for novelty in food, they also seek for familiarity in their food quest (Chang et al., 2010; Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Fox, 2007; Kim et al., 2009).

### **Expectation on *Bahulu* as a Tourism Product**

When their expectation of the food was probed deeper by asking question no. (2) which specifically links *bahulu* to the element of tourism, it was really interesting to find that their expectation of the food is now expanded to include the element of Malay tradition of baking the food and the need to promote Malaysia’s image and reputation as a nation. “Malay”, “heritage”, “Malaysia” and “traditional” were the words most commonly used to describe their additional expectations of the food while keeping to the list of objective quality earlier. Most wanted to find the product attached with the element of tradition and heritage quality rather than being modern. Overall, the tourist’s expectations included both the objective and subjective/perceived quality aspects of the product.

“I expect to see *bahulu* that can represent Malaysia’s heritage as a nation... not the modern ones...I think people from overseas would like to find authentic food not found elsewhere.

See, we can easily find modern version of *bahulu* anywhere. They come in the version of cup cakes, muffin... you know... must be traditional like the ones I grew up with... As a tourism product, it involves our country's image, so the *bahulu* found here must adhere to the high quality standard set by the government... Quality can be the downfall of or the thriving of a product. So, it is important for the food to be fresh from the oven, very tasty, spongy, soft... maybe can make it melt in the mouth..." (IR 5).

"For me, *bahulu* is still *bahulu*, no matter what people say. However, as tourism product, I think I expect *bahulu* that can offer me with something special... why I am here today is because I want to get *bahulu* that I can relate to my childhood years... the time when I sat beside my grandmother making *bahulu* the traditional way, ... the sweet memories..." (IR 17).

Some of the interviewees, however, stressed that as a tourism product, *bahulu* should be made marketable and thus, as a product, they expected to see the varieties of *bahulu* offered to them (including the modern version of making *bahulu*).

"I expect to find many varieties of *bahulu* presented to me... and each version should be equally tasty, delicious, spongy,... not forgetting the fragrant smells of *bahulu*... these must be there... You know, like Dunkin Donuts, you've been there right? See, they offer all sorts of flavours although the [food] base is still the same. It is still donut down there. I don't care how, but it means that as tourist, I get to choose and decide which ones would suit to my taste more – whether it is the traditional *bahulu* or the modern, crazy *bahulu*... ha, ha, ha [laughing]" (IR 7).

It is when the tourists are asked about their expectation about *bahulu* as tourism product that the symbolic aspect of the food emerged clearly from their responses. This is when the study identified the other 3Ps to be emphasized in their responses. For example, price was the most talked about followed by place/location, and promotion. It is interesting to find that tourists expected to get cheaper prices of the food than the normal or standard retail prices when visiting the traditional food production sites.

"...I expected to get cheaper price here [at the production site] than from the supermarkets. But of course, quality must be there. ... I don't expect to buy *bahulu* if I think the price is expensive." (IR 7).

In one excerpt, the interviewee described a long list of his expectations which are found to be very much related to the marketing mix strategies (4Ps – product, price, place, promotion).

"Aiyaa,... *bahulu* alone cannot be expected to perform miracles. Although it is a Malay cake, it must not be marketed as the Malay's food, it should be promoted as Malaysia's [emphasized on the word Malaysia] traditional food, which are now eaten by all the races in the country. It is part of us, as Malaysians. Same as *roti canaila*... although it is Indian food, still, all Malaysian eat it. But if *bahulu* is a tourism product, I expect to see *bahulu*

to be nicely packaged, not just packaged in the clear plastic like this one [gesturing his hands towards *bahulu* on the racks]. This will not make it interesting. I want something that can ‘wow’ me like *bahulu* presented in a *tampiberas* [note: this refers to a bamboo or rattan-made tray used by padi farmers to separate rice from the husk], or batik box for a change. *Barulah cantik* [only then it is presentable], you know... can be given as gift... Of course, government should set up specific place like the RTC [note: this refers to Rural Transformation Centres set up by the government at various locations in Malaysia to help local producers sell their products straight to end consumers rather than going through middlemen] to promote the selling of all types of *bahulu*... modern or traditional, gives tourists choice. ...cleanliness is warranted ... see, like this place [gesturing his hands in the air] ... the production is set too close to the owner’s house. You get confused as to which one is the production site and which one is the house [tone and facial expressions change to sound and seemed more serious]” (IR 11).

Some of the tourist consumers thought that there should be more signs erected by the roadsides/highways so that the place can be easily located rather than having to stop several times to ask other people for the right direction which can be a turn off for tourists like them. They also thought that related information about the product, location, and price should be uploaded on the websites so that they can be found easily. As one tourist puts it, “What good is this food if nobody can taste it because no one knows how to get it. I was fortunate that my homestay host brought me here.” (IR 21).

What these findings show is that *bahulu* has the potential to be marketed as a tourism product in line with Abdul Wahid’s (2009) suggestion. However, it must be accompanied by other peripherals that will enhance its value as a tourism product. As a tourism product, apart from monitoring its core aspect (i.e. food quality), the promotion of *bahulu* should be closely associated with cultural elements such as tradition and heritage. In addition, more promotional tools are needed such as the use of internet and social media, road signage, pricing, packaging and others. It is interesting to find that tourists who participated in the study possess the enthusiasm about the food, possibly due to their background as domestic tourists who have grown up with the food since their birth. Although one of the tourists was from Singapore, she also admitted that *bahulu* is one local cake that she grew up with and continued to love until today. Of course, she said that *bahulu* is not as popular in Singapore as in Malaysia because the country promotes other delicacies like Singapore chillie crab to brand its traditional food.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Several conclusions can be made from the findings. One, this study confirms the potential of *bahulu* as a tourism product. Tourists have shared their views and confidence that *bahulu* has the ability to become one and is in fact one (as proven by the tourists who had travelled far and wide to *bahulu* production sites to sample and experience the food themselves). Two, tourists’ expectation on *bahulu* perceived as a normal or regular food product is built mostly on its sensorial and functional qualities rather than its symbolic quality. However,

when perceived as a tourism product, *bahulu*'s symbolic function emerged to be more prominent than the other two. This implies that the priority of food qualities changes with different tourists' expectations of the product. Three, *bahulu* must be appropriately packaged before it can be promoted as a tourism product focusing to strategize on the 4Ps (product, price, place, and promotion) or the marketing mix. By doing so, there will be no comments like "*bahulu* is *bahulu*" or "*bahulu* cannot be expected to perform miracles". While focusing on its special heritage character, *bahulu* must also be offered in wide varieties (e.g., different flavours, modern shapes, sizes) as expected by tourists alike.

The findings of the study imply that *bahulu*'s potential can be built via grounded theory as used in the study. The findings also imply that while *bahulu*'s potential as a tourism product exists, the effort in making this a success lies very much on the government's lead in helping and guiding the micro and small *bahulu* producers into the right direction. As these people are known to have limitations with their finances and other resources, it is up to the Ministry (tourism) and agencies like FAMA, MADA, MARA, SMIDEC and many others to prepare the micro producers professionally, particularly to build an understanding on how certain policies or regulations will help them increase their sales and market growth with new customers, and as the food is sold under the ticket of tourism or food tourism, they will enhance the image of the country and make the country a hub for traditional, heritage food.

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