

## PRESERVING CULINARY HERITAGE THROUGH GASTRONOMIC TOURISM: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY ON THE KAKANIN-MAKING TRADITION OF CABATUAN, ISABELA, PHILIPPINES

### *PRESERVANDO O PATRIMÔNIO CULINÁRIO ATRAVÉS DO TURISMO GASTRONÓMICO: UM ESTUDO DE CASO QUALITATIVO SOBRE A TRADIÇÃO DE CONFECCÃO DE KAKANIN EM CABATUAN, ISABELA, FILIPINAS*

Article received on: 10/9/2025

Article accepted on: 1/9/2026

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

#### **Abstract**

This qualitative case study examined the kakanin-making tradition of Cabatuan, Isabela, aimed at comprehending how local food practices become a source of cultural heritage conservation and local gastronomic tourism growth. Data for the research came from semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis of twenty (20) individuals who were purposively selected: kakanin producers, municipal officers, and long-term residents. Thematic analysis revealed five major themes: (1) kakanin-making as a living culinary heritage, (2) high community awareness and identity linkage, (3) rich but underdeveloped gastronomic tourism potential, (4) continuous challenges of modernization, marketability, and lack of institutional support, and (5) community resilience as a basis for cultural continuity and sustainable development. The findings show that the preparation of kakanin is still at the heart of Cabatuan's cultural identity. Residents have high awareness and are emotionally attached to the culture despite less participation of the youth. The study emphasizes the need to incorporate food heritage in the local tourism policy and educational programs as a means of cultural perpetuation. It ends with the statement that gastronomic culture in Cabatuan serves as a cultural narrative—a complex network of tradition, innovation, and identity that sustains rural development which is environmentally, socially, and economically viable. By maintaining its traditional foodways, Cabatuan may be able to present itself as a heritage-based gastronomic tourism prototype not only to the

#### **Resumo**

*Este estudo de caso qualitativo examinou a tradição da confecção de kakanin em Cabatuan, Isabela, com o objetivo de compreender como as práticas alimentares locais se tornam uma fonte de conservação do patrimônio cultural e de crescimento do turismo gastronômico local. Os dados para a pesquisa foram obtidos a partir de entrevistas semiestruturadas, observação participante e análise de documentos de vinte (20) indivíduos selecionados propositalmente: produtores de kakanin, funcionários municipais e residentes de longa data. A análise temática revelou cinco temas principais: (1) a confecção de kakanin como patrimônio culinário vivo, (2) alta conscientização da comunidade e vínculo de identidade, (3) potencial turístico gastronômico rico, mas subdesenvolvido, (4) desafios contínuos da modernização, comercialização e falta de apoio institucional e (5) resiliência da comunidade como base para a continuidade cultural e o desenvolvimento sustentável. Os resultados mostram que a preparação do kakanin ainda está no centro da identidade cultural de Cabatuan. Os residentes têm alta consciência e estão emocionalmente ligados à cultura, apesar da menor participação dos jovens. O estudo enfatiza a necessidade de incorporar o patrimônio alimentar na política de turismo local e nos programas educacionais como um meio de perpetuação cultural. Ele termina com a afirmação de que a cultura gastronômica em Cabatuan serve como uma narrativa cultural — uma rede complexa de tradição, inovação e identidade que sustenta o desenvolvimento rural que é ambiental, social e economicamente viável. Ao manter seus hábitos*



rest of the country but also to the world, the Philippines.

**Keywords:** Culinary heritage. Gastronomic Tourism. Kakanin-Making. Cultural Sustainability. Food Culture.

*alimentares tradicionais, Cabatuan pode ser capaz de se apresentar como um protótipo de turismo gastronômico baseado no patrimônio, não apenas para o resto do país, mas também para o mundo, as Filipinas.*

**Palavras-chave:** Patrimônio Culinário. Turismo Gastronômico. Fabricação de Kakanin. Sustentabilidade Cultural. Cultura Alimentar.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Food is not only a necessity but also a symbol—a representation of the past, the present, and the future of the culture and society it comes from. Currently, food-related activities have become one of the main sustainable development and tourism areas. This has also helped to link the local communities with the global travelers through the shared food experiences. As per the joint report of the World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) and Basque Culinary Center (2019), gastronomy tourism includes the phenomena of traveling to enjoy food and participate in related activities that express the cultural, agricultural, and social aspects of the destination. Furthermore, as one of the cultural heritages, gastronomy helps in realizing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) among which are the ones related to inclusive economic growth, rural revitalization, and responsible consumption (UNWTO, 2024).

Worldwide, countries have warmed up to the idea that their cultural culinary owned can be a great source of both income and fame. To expand on that, the traditional sake brewing in Japan that has been dated back to the last few centuries was finally added to the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2024. This has effectively demonstrated the power of agri-food networks not only in identity preservation but also in the tourism industry (Reuters, 2024). Such certifications from different parts of the globe - Asia, Europe, and Latin America - reveal a significant step toward the protection of traditional food as a part of worldwide heritage and tourism directive. Besides that, research works suggest that local engagement and genuineness are the main determinants for the successful establishment of sustainable gastronomic destinations (Liu et al., 2025; Huertas-López et al., 2019).

In the Philippines, the use of food heritage in tourism has got official recognition through the Food and Gastronomy Tourism Strategic Framework and Roadmap 2024–2029, led by the Department of Tourism (DOT, 2025). This roadmap is positioning Filipino food as one of the country's main assets in tourism and thus it is committed to the creation of "culinary zones" and the strengthening of farm-to-table relations in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture (DA). Besides, the DOT had a partnership with the United Nations Tourism Regional Forum on Gastronomy Tourism for Asia and the Pacific (2024) to ensure that the national efforts align with the worldwide regulations of sustainable food tourism. Altogether, these projects reveal the government's kaffir commitment to making gastronomy tourism a local community empowerment and economic inclusion driver besides cultural preservation.

The province of Isabela, and more specifically, the municipality of Cabatuan is a good example of how food traditions at the local level can become the community's identity. Cabatuan is a place where you can easily find kakanin or native rice deliceries such as muriecos, bibingka, tupig, and latik which show the agricultural heritage which is deeply rooted in the culture and has been resistant for a long time. These rice-based delicacies which are ordinarily made from glutinous rice, coconut milk, and banana leaves are not just foods but have become the symbols of communal memory, festivities, and worship. The authors cited above by their studies (Fernandez, 1988; Mercado and Andelecio, 2020) point out that Filipino food is a mixture of both indigenous and colonial sources, revealing how local foodways represent the survival and the continuation of the historical transitions.

However, in spite of this cultural richness, the process of modernization, globalization, and changes in consumer lifestyles have become the main reasons why traditional food practices are vanishing. The young generations mostly consume commercial fast food and the producers of kakanin find it hard to market, brand, and keep their products fresh. In their paper, Liba and co-authors (2017) sounded the alarm that native delicacies in the Philippines will be gone if no policies, education, and tourism promotion are put in place to actively preserve them. The local government through the tourism office in Cabatuan understands the struggle of the kakanin industry to compete in food markets at present times even though it is still a very strong source of community pride.

Studies everywhere have proven that food heritage can become both a cultural asset and a tourism differentiator. According to Ellis and his co-authors (2018), gastronomy tourism should not only focus on the act of eating but should also include cultural processes that are involved in food production, preparation, and storytelling. In this sense, the making of kakanin in Cabatuan is more than just food; it is a cultural system that connects the community with the environment, the craftspeople, and the community. However, there is still a lack of research on how small rural towns in the Philippines use their food heritage as part of their tourism image, especially within global discourses on sustainability and heritage conservation.

Therefore, this research was initiated to understand the culinary image of Cabatuan, Isabela through its kakanin-making tradition as well as to identify the challenges and opportunities in promoting and preserving this culinary heritage. Through the use of a qualitative case study design, this study intends to understand the communal narratives, participations, and viewpoints of the community regarding kakanin-making which is indicative of the local identity formation and the tourism potential.

## **2 MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **2.1 Research design**

A qualitative case study design was used by this study to investigate the gastronomic image of Cabatuan, Isabela as represented by its kakanin-making tradition and to distinguish the dominant challenges in its promotion and preservation. The case study design was employed as it facilitates a detailed investigation of a bounded system within its real-life context (Yin, 2018). This design fits perfectly with tourism and cultural heritage research specially that it opens the door to a full understanding of community-based practices of the place through various data sources and interpretive analysis (Stake, 2005). Besides, the qualitative approach is consistent with the study's objective of revealing the meanings, experiences, and contextual factors of the local culinary tradition, that is not possible to quantify. Using a contextual and interpretive lens, the study aimed to present an integrated account of Cabatuan's gastronomic identity based on the stories and lived experiences of community stakeholders.

## **2.2 Research locale**

The research took place in the municipality of Cabatuan, Isabela, situated in the Cagayan Valley region of Northern Philippines. Cabatuan is mainly an agricultural community and is well-known for its *kakanin* or rice-based delicacies such as *muriecos*, *bibingka*, *latik*, and *tupig* made in a traditional manner. The town has started the trip to becoming a culinary destination in the province by branding these delicacies as both the cultural identity of the area and rural tourism-assets. The pick of the location was intentional since Cabatuan exemplifies a community where the traditional culinary practices are not only surviving but also facing the challenges of modernization and market-driven food trends. Doing the research within this local setting enabled us to investigate the topics of cultural preservation, economic livelihood, and tourism development as the three sides of a triangle that meet in a rural Philippine milieu.

## **2.3 Participants**

Researchers selectively chose participants who were either directly involved or had extensive knowledge of the *kakanin*-making tradition and local tourism activities of Cabatuan. The sample consisted of *kakanin* producers and vendors, municipal tourism and cultural officers, and long-term residents who were very familiar with the community's culinary practices. Twenty (20) participants in total were involved in the study, a number that was considered enough to reach thematic saturation while still having a variety of viewpoints. The inclusion criteria for participants were that they must have lived or worked in Cabatuan for at least five years and have considerable experience in culinary or cultural activities related to *kakanin*. The purposive sampling was a way of ensuring that the chosen individuals could offer detailed, well-grounded insights in the local context that would be relevant to the study's objectives.

## **2.4 Data Collection procedures**

Purposive methods were used to come up with the participants. They were people who either had to be directly involved or have thorough knowledge of Cabatuan's

kakanin-making tradition and the local tourism activities. There were kakanin producers, municipal tourism and cultural officers, and the residents who have been with the community for a long and who are very familiar with the community's culinary practices. Twenty (20) individuals altogether participated in the study. This figure of the participants is considered adequate not only to reach thematic saturation, but also to keep the diversity of perspectives varied. The residents or workers of Cabatuan for at least five years and the ones who have had substantial experience in culinary or cultural activities related to kakanin were the ones allowed to participate in the study. With purposive sampling, the people chosen are the ones who can give deep and rich insights which are also grounded in the context and relevant to the study's objectives.

The data collection process took several months to complete and included semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis. This variety of data sources was used for triangulation of information and to enhance the data credibility. The semi-structured interviews were held face-to-face and the interviewer used a flexible guide. The guide mainly focused on the participant's knowledge, perceptions, and experiences about the production of kakanin, the use of the same in cultural traditions, and tourism promotion. Depending on participants' preference, interviews were held either in the local dialect or in Filipino. Participants' consent was obtained prior to the recording of these interactions. Observations were made in places where the researcher conducted market visits, community fairs, and production sessions. The researcher noted down the documented process of kakanin preparation and the tools that were used. Also, the researcher took note of the social interactions between the producers and buyers. Besides these, there are a few documents like municipal tourism development plans, promotional materials, and other relevant local government records which were reviewed by the researcher to offer support to the context and give historical depth to the qualitative data.

Ethical considerations formed the backbone of the research process and were observed meticulously throughout the research process. Before participation, every candidate received an informed consent form that laid out the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of the study, and the provisions of confidentiality. To make sure privacy is maintained, codes are used in place of names in transcripts and reports. Audio-recorded files and field notes are kept in a safe place and only the researcher has the access to them.

## 2.5 Data analysis

Qualitative data from all sources were literally transcribed and thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The analysis was in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Themes that recurred, shared meanings, and even unique narratives revealing the community's gastronomic identity and the dynamics of *kakanin*-making were surfaced through thematic analysis. The researcher used an inductive coding method which means that themes were allowed to come out naturally from the data without the researcher having to impose pre-existing theoretical constructs. In order to have a richer interpretation, the researchers compared and integrated data from interviews, field notes, and documents in an iterative manner, thereby ensuring not only internal consistency but also contextual accuracy. The point of data saturation was reached when no new significant themes could be identified from the further interviews.

## 2.6 Trustworthiness of the study

In order to maintain methodological rigor, the research complied with four criteria of trustworthiness by Lincoln and Guba (1985) - credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Some of the methods used to ensure credibility were long involvement in the field, triangulation of data sources, and member checking, in which participants checked and approved the key interpretations. Transferability was done by giving a rich description of the research context and the participants' real environment which helps readers decide the applicability of the findings to the similar contexts. Dependability was discussed through a detailed audit trail that included documentation of decisions, data management procedures, and reflective memos. Moreover, confirmability was obtained through the maintenance of researcher reflexivity, thus, ensuring that the interpretations were based on the participants' perspectives and not the researchers' personal bias. The use of various data sources and the iterative analysis also strengthened the integration, which led to a comprehensive and dependable

understanding of Cabatuan's gastronomic heritage and the socio-cultural dynamics that sustain it.

### 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Theme 1. Kakanin-Making as a living culinary heritage

The findings show that kakanin-making in Cabatuan, Isabela is not only one of the traditional local food but is also a heritage that has been passed down through generations and is shared by the entire community. To describe it, participants reach their hands through scenes and words from the interviews and field observations as they pointed out muriecos, bibingka, tupig, and latik as manifestations of love, faith, and recollections of the past. The preparation of such delicacies, which are dependent on glutinous rice, coconut milk, and banana leaves, is still very much a hands-on and family tradition that is handed down from one generation to another rather than taught in schools.

About three-fourths of the kakanin producers interviewed declared that they were determined to keep “the old taste” and regarded authenticity as the manual preparation of the dishes with the use of ingredients coming from the local area. These data support the view of Ellis et al. (2018) who argued that gastronomy tourism is not only about consumption but involves cultural processes behind food production. The survival of such artisanal techniques is an example of what Fernandez (1988) termed the Filipino ability for “culinary continuity”—a cultural preservation practice performed in the face of social changes.

On the other hand, they also pointed out changes in the level of engagement of the community with the kakanin tradition, especially of the youth who considered that kakanin is something that belonged to “older times.” This new alienation of kakanin is a very serious matter if we consider Liba et al. (2017) who informed of a generational gap resulting in the loss of native delicacies. However, the continuation of the heritage method of producing food, like for instance grilling over charcoal and the use of silyasi (iron vats), is a clear indication that they are managing to withstand the pressure and are adapting to it in a way that is still rooted in their locale.

These findings position Cabatuan's kakanin-making as a form of intangible cultural heritage, consistent with UNESCO's (2003) framework recognizing community-based knowledge systems as vehicles of identity and continuity. The community's culinary practice thus serves not only as sustenance but also as a symbolic medium of belonging, echoing Mercado and Andalecio's (2020) notion of food as cultural narrative.

### **3.2 Theme 2. awareness and cultural identity among residents**

Findings show that residents are highly aware of the cultural and historical aspects of the kakanin tradition. Most of the respondents are able to identify the main kinds of kakanin made in Cabatuan and explain the customary methods of preparation. Such extensive knowledge reveals that food remains a vital part of local collective memory, serving as a store of community pride.

The respondents related kakanin with "the soul of Cabatuan," calling it a unifying cultural marker that sets the town apart from other municipalities in Isabela. Senior citizens, especially, considered the practice as their duty—to keep alive what their parents and grandparents had handed down. This intergenerational awareness reflects the idea of gastronomic heritage as social glue put forward by Huertas-López et al. (2019), which culinary continuity not only strengthens place identity but also community cohesion.

On the other hand, the statistics also uncovered an age-related gap in the understanding of the issue. The older generation of producers voices emotional attachment in contrast to younger residents who are less familiar with and interested in the traditional foodways and prefer modernized snacks and fast food. This difference points to the global conflict between modernization and cultural retention (Liu et al., 2025). It also emphasizes the need for educational initiatives that include gastronomy in local cultural programs, which is a strategy in line with the recommendations of the UNWTO and Basque Culinary Center (2019) for the protection of food heritage through participatory education.

Generational divergence notwithstanding, the persistence of awareness indicates that food heritage in Cabatuan is still culturally alive. Nevertheless, without institutional support through local schools and tourism programs, recognition alone may not lead to sustainable practice. As Mercado and Andalecio (2020) point out, awareness has to be

transformed into preservation that is actionable if culinary traditions are to survive as heritage assets.

### **3.3 Theme 3. gastronomic resources and tourism potential**

Field data showed that Cabatuan is a place full of gastronomic tourism assets that are not well developed. There is a growing number of small-scale producers, municipal food fairs, and tourism events featuring muriecos and other rice delicacies, as participants pointed out. The events, although they are limited in number, have already started to position Cabatuan as the next culinary destination of Isabela.

With the help of the tourism and culture office, the local government has set the ball rolling by initiating collaborations with schools and provincial fairs to feature traditional delicacies. Most of the respondents, however, have a different opinion that the gastronomic image of the town is still at the grassroots level and lacks promotion. As one municipal officer put it, “People know our muriecos, but not Cabatuan itself.” It is indicative of a branding gap between the product and the destination, which is one of the main challenges identified by Ellis et al. (2018) in destination food marketing.

The restaurant and hotel industry data portray that the facilities for accommodation and dining are still at a basic level, but the zeal of the community makes up for these shortcomings in terms of hospitality and cultural participation. Just as the situation is in Andalusia, Spain (Huertas-López et al., 2019), Cabatuan is an example of how rural gastronomy has the potential to trigger tourism if accompanied by consistent branding, local involvement, and policy agreement.

The results confirm the idea that Cabatuan’s food culture is not fully utilized to set the town apart from other tourist destinations. The question of sustainable growth is going to be contingent upon the integrated development model that connects farmers, the education sector, and tourism promotion through a common gastronomic narrative. It resonates with the view of Liu et al. (2025), who argue for the modernization of local cuisines without the loss of tradition through value-driven reinterpretation.

### **3.4 Theme 4. challenges in promoting and preserving kakanin-making**

Participants identified several interrelated challenges inhibiting the preservation and promotion of Cabatuan's culinary heritage:

#### *3.4.1 Modernization and youth disinterest*

Producers repeatedly cited the lack of youth participation as the foremost threat. Younger residents prefer employment outside food production, perceiving kakanin-making as “old-fashioned” or economically unviable.

#### *3.4.2 Limited marketability and product perishability*

The short shelf life of kakanin constrains distribution beyond local markets. Producers lack modern packaging technology, resulting in limited shelf stability and competitiveness.

#### *3.4.3 Insufficient institutional support*

Respondents identified the lack of organized marketing strategies and the insufficiency of funds for the promotion of the culinary sector as the most significant issues. Although the local government has acknowledged kakanin as a heritage product, formal integration into the provincial gastronomy roadmap is still at the stage of initial discussion. These issues reflect the challenges discussed by Lin (2019) and Lee (2015), who have observed that globalization and commercialization tend to diminish culinary authenticity. Nevertheless, they also signify the potential for the localities to turn these issues into opportunities. By deepening the cooperation among government departments, local schools, and small enterprises there could be not only market resilience but also cultural integrity preservation. Working on these problems is in line with the recommendation of the UNWTO-BCC (2019) to enhance policy coordination between the sectors of tourism, agriculture, and education. Cabatuan's story is a good example of the necessity of governance that is open to all for heritage-based tourism—where cultural

authenticity and economic sustainability are not two separate things that one has to lose while the other gains but rather two positive results that go hand in hand.

### **3.5 Theme 5. cultural continuity and sustainable development**

The community, however, culturally resilient, are struggling within the system. The old generation of food producers are eager to pass down their knowledge to the young ones, not only the recipes but also the rites and the symbolism that go along with each delicacy. Besides that, schools have started blending local culinary heritage with technical-vocational courses which is also a form of cultural education through practice.

These programs are in line with the worldwide concepts of gastronomy tourism as a tool for sustainable development (UNWTO, 2024), where food is both a cultural expression and a source of livelihood. In this way, the kakanin-making in Cabatuan can be seen as the rural resilience model—a small-scale, real-world example of inclusive and sustainable tourism.

The example of Cabatuan is that culinary heritage constitutes the core not just for preservation but also transformation—securing that the traditional knowledge goes on hand in hand with the current social and economic realities. Liu et al. (2025) claim that the essence of culinary heritage is in its ability to develop while keeping its cultural core.

The findings, in general, depict that one of the local food traditions of Cabatuan which is making kakanin, is a tradition that involves the three elements of culture, identity, and environment. The people show a high level of understanding and a strong emotional connection, however, the presence of certain challenges at the level of institutions and generations may result in the gradual disappearance of the practice. A better integration of tourism, educational programs, and product development might lead to the transformation of this living tradition into a sustainable gastronomic tourism model.

In line with the views of Ellis et al. (2018), food heritage in Cabatuan is not only a cultural resource but also a narrative system that chronicles the stories of belonging, inventiveness, and continuity. Therefore, each muriecos or tupig made is not just a treat but a symbolic gesture of the preservation of heritage and the pride of the community.

## 4 CONCLUSION

This study indicates that the kakanin-making tradition of Cabatuan, Isabela, is a vivid example of the town's cultural identity, its heritage, and the potential of its local cuisine. Using qualitative thematic analysis, the research found that the local kakanin, particularly muriecos, bibingka, tupig, and latik, are not just foods but represent the knowledge system for different generations that link food, memory, and community identity. The community's high level of awareness, cultural pride, and informal mentorship even though there modernization pressures and few institutional supports, have been the main factors that have guaranteed the continuity of this culinary heritage. The research declares gastronomy as a medium of cultural storytelling and rural empowerment rather than just consumption which is in line with the sustainable development goals that recognize food heritage as both a social and economic asset.

### 4.1 Recommendations

If Cabatuan's kakanin tradition is to be maintained and promoted effectively through a study, then local governments should consider implementing a multi-sectoral strategy that is based on heritage education, local enterprise development, and policy integration. The local government units together with the Department of Tourism should offer culinary heritage programs through which the participants will undergo training workshops, youth mentorship, and small-scale innovation in packaging and marketing to facilitate product viability. Schools should take the lead in integrating traditional foodways into their cultural curricula, and tourism offices should come up with a branding campaign to position Cabatuan as a gastronomic destination. Continuous collaboration among artisans, local officials, and cultural advocates will, therefore, be a guarantee that kakanin-making will not only be preserved as a cultural heritage but also become a sustainable tourism driver.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The researcher would like to express sincere thanks to **Dr. Troy Alexander G. Miano**, Provincial Tourism Officer of the Province of Isabela, for his support and contribution to preserving and promoting the kakanin-making tradition in Cabatuan, Isabela. His efforts, in line with **Executive Order No. 19-A, s. 2023**, have inspired this study and helped strengthen the province's cultural and gastronomic tourism programs.

Gratitude is also extended to the **Provincial Government of Isabela** and the **Municipality of Cabatuan** for their continuous commitment to protecting local culture and supporting community-based culinary heritage.

Finally, heartfelt thanks to all kakanin makers and residents who shared their stories and experiences, making this research possible.

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**Authors' Contribution**

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

**Data availability**

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

**How to cite this article (APA)**

Matulin, M. V. (2026). PRESERVING CULINARY HERITAGE THROUGH GASTRONOMIC TOURISM: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY ON THE KAKANIN-MAKING TRADITION OF CABATUAN, ISABELA, PHILIPPINES. *Veredas Do Direito*, 23(4), e234828. <https://doi.org/10.18623/rvd.v23.n4.4828>