

Developing Green Tourism Destinations in Ha Giang: A Local Cuisine Approach

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ABSTRACT

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Researchers increasingly consider cuisine as a unique and rich resource to enhance tourists' travel experiences. The contributions of culinary culture to the exploitation of tourism potential and development at destinations are increasingly undeniable. However, the interest of researchers in this field is still quite limited, especially in approaching and exploiting it as an aspect to develop green tourism. With the role of contributing to increasing the value of tourism experiences at destinations while facilitating cultural sustainability, cuisine is an aspect that needs to be paid attention to and exploited. Cuisine plays a valuable role, reflecting the identity and cultural characteristics of residents at the destination while providing a profound understanding of that land. This study uses a qualitative approach and a triangular data collection method, which involves the participation of the local community, culinary tourism, the culinary industry and local government. The study employs SWOT data analysis and flow model analysis techniques to yield results.

Keywords: Tourism; Green tourism; Culinary tourism; Sustainable development; Ha Giang.

1. INTRODUCTION

Food and Gastronomy (F&G) is increasingly recognised as an important resource in sustainable tourism development at destinations. Studies show that F&G contributes positively to the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. In addition, F&G is considered a factor that enhances the attractiveness and competitiveness of destinations (Mohd Salim et al., 2024; Onat, 2024; Sio et al., 2024). It is also a unique cultural symbol, not only reflecting local identity but also contributing to building a national tourism brand and enhancing destination recognition value through promoting speciality dishes (Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020; Sormaz et al., 2016).

Protecting natural resources and preserving local cultural values are top priorities in the context of sustainable tourism and the global green tourism trend. Modern tourists prioritise sustainable local culinary experiences during their trips, providing and developing green culinary products based on traditional production methods, environmentally friendly and protecting human health is a new direction in green tourism development today (Haidy & Mohamed, 2024). The green culinary tourism model not only focuses on sustainability, enhancing experiences and preserving local culture but also contributes to promoting local economic development and environmental protection.

According to recent studies, gastronomy plays a significant role in the growth of tourism. It may be used to communicate local identity and let visitors "taste" the destination's distinctiveness through food production, processing, and consumption (Berno & Fusté-Forné, 2022). Additionally, food helps visitors better understand the destination's cultural values, which increases the possibility that they will return (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). However, the potential of food in promoting green tourism has not been completely realised, particularly in terms of reducing adverse environmental effects and conserving cultural values that have not been discussed.

Ha Giang, located in the far north of the country, has emerged as a promising tourist destination, ranked 25th out of 52 global destinations by The New York Times. Ha Giang is not only known for its wild and majestic natural beauty, along with the unique cultural background of the ethnic communities living in the area, but also for the difference in local cuisine that creates intriguing experiences for tourists. Therefore, in the strategy of developing culinary tourism, it is an important factor to help distinguish and enhance the attractiveness of a destination (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). Integrating local cuisine into green tourism development not only creates economic value but also helps preserve and promote the cultural identity of residents, raise community awareness of natural resource conservation, and pave the way for sustainable development in the context of globalisation and climate change.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Green tourism, also known as ecotourism or sustainable tourism, involves local cultural elements, operating under the control of local communities, creating jobs and maintaining economic benefits in communities (Yfantidou et al., 2017; Yfantidou & Matarazzo, 2017). It also includes environmentally friendly tourism activities and services (Furqan et al., 2010). The three basic pillars of green tourism include natural resource conservation, socio-cultural preservation and community economic development.

In particular, preserving Indigenous cultural values, especially cuisine, plays a key role in the development of green tourism by integrating local culture, traditions and sustainable activities into the tourism experience (Giampiccoli & Kalis, 2012; Guzel & Apaydin, 2016; Sorcaru, 2019). Previously, food, beverage and accommodation were only considered as supporting services, but now unique culinary experiences are recognised as attractive factors for tourists (Georgică et al., 2014; C. M. Hall, 2005). Research shows that approximately 25–30% of tourist spending is on food, demonstrating the pivotal role of gastronomy in connecting tourists to local culture and traditions, creating unique experiences, and promoting cultural heritage preservation and development (Baysal & Nilgün, 2024; Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2024; Rodrigues et al., 2022). At the same time, unique local dishes and culinary traditions help brand destinations, making them more attractive to tourists seeking authentic experiences (Baysal & Nilgün, 2024; Bellini et al., 2018; Giampiccoli & Kalis, 2012).

In the context of green tourism, gastronomy is a bridge between cultural preservation and cultural heritage preservation. Furthermore, natural resource management contributes to the promotion of biodiversity and respect for local customs (Tüzün et al., 2019). Gastronomic tourism provides authentic experiences, helping visitors explore cultural depth through traditional flavours and cooking techniques, enhancing the visitor experience, and tourists often return to destinations to experience the unique local cuisine again, demonstrating a strong link between cuisine and tourist satisfaction (Cleave, 2011; Georgică et al., 2014; Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2024; Kivela & Crofts, 2006; Moura et al., 2025). At the same time, combining organic agriculture with tourism, known as agroecological tourism, will support biodiversity, preserve natural landscapes and promote the sale of eco-products (Cerutti et al., 2016; Vrsaljko et al., 2017). This combination opens up the potential for developing a new green tourism model, promoting a sense of responsibility among local communities and tourists (Yaşar & Serkin, 2022).

Gastronomic tourism is considered an important driver in the overall development of green tourism because it promotes entrepreneurship and local economic growth. This type of tourism helps attract more tourists. It strengthens the connection of local businesses (e.g. local farms and restaurants) into the tourism value chain, thereby creating jobs, increasing income for local communities, as well as enhancing cultural experiences for tourists (Dracheva et al., 2021; Giampiccoli & Kalis, 2012; Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2024).

In addition, the Activities aimed at reducing food transportation distances through prioritising the use of local ingredients, along with promoting the development of indigenous culinary products, play an important role in improving environmental sustainability in the tourism industry. These strategies not only reduce logistics-related carbon emissions but also support the conservation of natural resources and promote green tourism models (Sommit & Boonpaisarnsatit, 2020; Stošić et al., 2025).

Therefore, effective culinary tourism development strategies need to be built on the principles of multi-stakeholder cooperation, prioritising sustainability, promoting community-based tourism (CBT) and enhancing tourist experiences (Giampiccoli & Kalis, 2012). On this basis, policymakers can apply research and practice to design

policies to enhance the role of cuisine in promoting sustainable tourism development while preserving local cultural values and resources (Bellini et al., 2018; Giampiccoli & Kalis, 2012).

However, the implementation of green development principles remains challenging and can have negative consequences. Therefore, the involvement of the media is needed, through which the destination's activities and commitments to green development through gastronomy are clearly communicated. This includes emphasising the use of local ingredients and exploiting traditional expertise, contributing to building a responsible destination image and attracting tourists interested in green development (Baysal & Nilgün, 2024; Ivashura et al., 2021; Sio et al., 2024). In addition, there is a need to connect cuisine with culture, agriculture and green development under professional management.

The relationship between food and green tourism development is reflected in two aspects: (1) Consuming local food creates economic spillover effects, increasing job opportunities for the community (Richards, 2001; Torres, 2002); (2) Reducing carbon footprint by limiting global food transportation, in line with the United Nations climate change response goals (C. M. Hall et al., 2004; Sims, 2009).

Cuisine plays a key role in green tourism development when it harmoniously integrates cultural diversity, economic value and sustainable activities. Harnessing indigenous culinary traditions along with promoting environmentally friendly culinary practices helps destinations create unique tourism experiences while supporting local community development and ecosystem protection (Long, 2024; Povey, 2011; Sims, 2009).

Ha Giang - Typical cuisine of the Northern midland and mountainous region of Vietnam

Ha Giang, with its pristine natural landscape and diverse ethnic minority cultures, is becoming an attractive culinary tourism destination. Culinary tourism here not only contributes to promoting indigenous cultural values but is also a model of sustainable development, boosting the local economy, protecting the environment and preserving cultural heritage (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2013). Ha Giang cuisine clearly reflects the identity of the Northern Midlands and Mountains region, with dishes bearing the imprint of nature, people and traditions of each ethnic group. Specialities such as men men, thang co, thang den, smoked meat, corn wine, Shan Tuyet tea... demonstrate the sophistication in processing techniques and the use of local ingredients. Some dishes, such as au tau porridge, buckwheat cake, mint honey, and Thanh Van corn wine, are only available in Ha Giang, creating a unique value for local cuisine. The New York Times (2023) and Vietnam records have affirmed Ha Giang's position as an outstanding culinary destination (Department of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, 2023; Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism Ha Giang, 2025). This is not only a dish but also a symbol of the harmony between nature and ethnic minority culture, expressed through local customs, beliefs and lifestyles. The diversity in cuisine is also a testament to the preservation of cultural heritage through festivals, traditional customs and historical stories associated with each dish.

Culinary tourism in Ha Giang promotes green development when typical agricultural products such as Shan Tuyet tea, corn, and cat cabbage both serve the consumption needs of local people and create important resources for the tourism industry to provide to tourists. Visitors can participate in the processing experience and learn about the organic agricultural production process, contributing to enhancing cultural values and protecting the environment. This model also strengthens the connection between ethnic communities and consumer markets while encouraging the development of clean agriculture and protecting natural ecosystems.

Ha Giang culinary tourism is closely linked to community tourism, where visitors not only enjoy cuisine but also immerse themselves in the cultural life of ethnic minorities through cultural experiences, participating in festivals and learning about traditional farming methods. This contributes to the preservation of handicrafts, typical products and spiritual and cultural values in the context of integration and social change.

Environmental protection is also a top priority in the development of Ha Giang culinary tourism. The use of fresh, clean ingredients, organic production and environmentally friendly measures in destination management, accommodation and restaurants helps minimise negative impacts, conserve resources and maintain a clean, green environment (M. C. Hall & Gössling, 2006). A sustainable supply chain from products such as Shan Tuyet tea and cardamom honey has both high economic value and contributes to the protection of natural resources. When

implemented scientifically and reasonably, Ha Giang culinary tourism not only promotes economic development but also preserves the environment and culture of ethnic minorities. With a harmonious combination of culture, organic agricultural products and community tourism, Ha Giang is becoming an ideal destination where visitors can enjoy unique cuisine while participating in the conservation and sustainable development of cultural and environmental values. This unique cuisine is not only a highlight in the journey of discovery but also a driving force for green and sustainable tourism, contributing to environmental protection and preserving local identity in the long term.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

The study applied qualitative methods combined with phenomenological or case study approaches. The research focused on collecting, analysing and evaluating current issues related to culinary tourism in Ha Giang and exploring the connection between these activities and sustainable tourism experiences. Actual data and information were collected from tourists and local communities, providing a rich foundation to expand and deepen the understanding of the research topic (Yin, 2018).

Triangulation was used to ensure the reliability of the data. Field observations focused on recording culinary tourism activities in Ha Giang, including surveys of typical locations and places with the potential to develop into prominent culinary destinations. Data triangulation included three main sources: semi-structured interviews, field observations and SWOT analysis. This design was consistent with the exploratory research objective, helping to clarify multidimensional aspects of the current situation and the potential for culinary tourism development in the locality (Stake, 1995).

3.2. Sample selection and demographic characteristics

The sample selection in this study was based on the principle of ensuring diversity and representativeness of relevant groups, aiming to collect multidimensional and in-depth data on green culinary tourism development in Ha Giang (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2014).

The study applied a non-probability, purposive sampling method to focus on subjects with in-depth knowledge or experience related to green culinary tourism development in Ha Giang. A total of 33 interviewees were selected, including 20 tourists with diverse ages (25-55 years old), genders and nationalities, to ensure diversity in culinary tourism experiences; 4 managers and businesses of culinary products; 3 destination managers; 3 local managers; and 3 research experts with expertise in sustainable tourism and culinary culture. The sample selection was aimed at covering three main groups of subjects: service consumers (tourists), service providers (businesses, destination managers), and management and policymakers (local officials, experts), while meeting the data saturation criteria according to qualitative research standards (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Guest et al., 2006).

3.3. Data collection

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews to explore stakeholders' perceptions, experiences, and perspectives on green food tourism (Vaivio, 2012). Interviews were recorded and carefully transcribed, conducted at multiple locations to increase representativeness and minimize bias (Patton, 2014). Field observations were also used to supplement and cross-check information (Angrosino, 2007).

3.4. Data analysis

In this study, the author applied the flow model of Miles and Huberman (1994) as the main analytical framework to process qualitative data collected from interviews and field observations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This model consists of three continuous and iterative stages: (1) data collection and preliminary coding, (2) organising and sorting data into themes or patterns, and (3) drawing conclusions based on the relationships between the identified themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The data analysis process began with open coding of the entire interview content to identify the meanings, concepts and themes that emerged related to green culinary tourism development in Ha Giang. These codes were then grouped

and linked together using axial coding, which helped clarify the relationships between themes and form key categories for further analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

In addition, the study applied SWOT analysis to comprehensively assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges in developing green culinary tourism in Ha Giang (Helms & Nixon, 2010). Data were managed and analysed using NVivo 12 software, which supports the systematic organisation, coding and visualisation of qualitative data (Edwards-Jones, 2014).

To ensure reliability and objectivity in coding, the research process included checking the consistency between analysts (intercoder reliability). Specifically, two independent researchers coded a part of the sample data, then compared and discussed to adjust inconsistent codes, reaching a consensus of over 85%, in accordance with the intercoder reliability standard (Campbell et al., 2013).

To enhance the reliability and transferability of the research results, the study applied a number of measures to verify data quality and qualitative analysis procedures according to common criteria in the fields of social sciences and tourism:

- Member checking: After the coding and preliminary analysis process is completed, the main results are sent back to a representative number of interview participants to confirm the accuracy and completeness of the information reflecting their experiences and perspectives. Feedback from participants helps to adjust, supplement or clarify unclear content, ensuring that the data is interpreted in accordance with the meaning that the participants intended to convey (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- Audit trail: The study maintains a detailed record of the data collection, coding, analysis, and reasoning that led to conclusions. This record includes audio recordings, coding sheets, minutes of discussions between researchers, and revised versions of codes. Maintaining and auditing this record helps ensure transparency, allowing other researchers to trace and evaluate the research process objectively (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- Diversification of data sources (Triangulation): The study used a multi-source data collection method, including interviews with different groups of subjects (tourists, managers, local officials, experts) and field observations to minimise bias caused by a single data source. The comparison and contrast of views from multiple groups contributed to strengthening the validity of the results (Denzin, 2017).
- Intercoder reliability: The process of checking the consistency between analysts in data coding, as described in the data analysis section, also plays an important role in ensuring the accuracy and objectivity of information decoding.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the actual survey data, the author conducted a SWOT analysis to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges of the culinary activities taking place in Ha Giang. In addition, the author implemented the second approach of using the model developed by Harrington related to the culinary identity model to identify the characteristics of culinary tourism in Ha Giang based on the results of the SWOT analysis performed, thereby identifying the identity of the province.

The discussion focuses on the culinary identity model of Ha Giang. Data were collected from the authors' observations and the results of interviews conducted by the authors in the research area. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 33 participants, including: 3 policy makers, 4 people in the culinary business, 3 tourism destination managers and 3 experts and 20 tourists. The interviews were conducted at different locations at different times.

4.1. SWOT Analysis of Culinary Tourism in Ha Giang based on Stakeholders' Experiences and Perceptions

Information collected from observations and interviews was organised into a SWOT matrix based on specific questions:

1. How can culinary tourism contribute to the development of Ha Giang?

2. What are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of culinary tourism in Ha Giang?

To answer the first question, we used the method of interviewing stakeholders on the role of culinary activities in tourism development, as well as the general development of Ha Giang. All interviewees agreed that culinary tourism can contribute to promoting local economic development in Ha Giang, contributing to increasing income for local people, as one of the tools to contribute to poverty reduction. Specifically, some respondents explained that culinary tourism activities in Ha Giang increase demand, especially in the field of food services. Interestingly, this increase focuses on local food products that are typical of Ha Giang.

The increased demand for local food products also creates a domino effect, improving the image of Ha Giang as an attractive tourist destination not only for tourists' enjoyment of natural resources, diverse cultural backgrounds and historical pictures through the ages but also emerging as an attractive destination for tourists through regional cuisine. The forms of promoting local products at some locations, such as souvenirs and food shops, have had a direct impact on local economic development. The common highlights from the interview results are shown in the following table 1.

Table 1. Summary of interview results on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges in developing green culinary tourism

Element	Main content	Illustrative quote	Quantitative index
Strengths	- Diverse cuisine, typical of the region, with dishes such as thang co, men men, au tau, mint honey, Shan Tuyet tea, stone cake, buckwheat waffle... - Culinary products are classified and certified to use the OCOP label, thereby enhancing the value and quality of the province's cuisine. - This is a land with majestic natural landscapes, favourable for developing green tourism, combined with cuisine to create the best experience for visitors when coming to Ha Giang. - The coexistence of 19 ethnic groups living in the area has created a diverse and unique culture, highlighting the community's culinary experience.	"Ha Giang cuisine is not only delicious but also a unique cultural symbol" (Local people). "OCOP-certified products help elevate local culinary products and increase the number of visitors to Ha Giang" (Owner of the production facility).	- The whole province has 152 products certified to meet OCOP standards. Of these, 148 products meet 3-star standards, 2 products meet 4-star standards, and 2 products meet 5-star national standards (Shan Tuyet tea, mint honey, oranges, yellow beef, seedless persimmons... Since then, the number of tourists has also increased, especially the number of visitors experiencing cuisine, increasing by 15% of visitors experiencing cuisine in 2024 compared to 2023.
Weaknesses	- The traffic infrastructure is still difficult, affecting accessibility to tourist destinations. - Service quality and service skills are uneven.	"Many routes to districts such as Dong Van, Meo Vac, and Hoang Su Phi are very difficult to travel, especially during the rainy season" (Tourism Business).	22% of customers complained about service quality.

	- Lack of strategic development linkages among stakeholders. - Risk of depletion of local raw materials due to overexploitation.	“Proper training is needed to improve service quality” (Tourism Management).	
Opportunity	- The trend of experiential tourism and green tourism is increasingly popular. - Ability to combine tourism with clean agricultural products and local specialties in tourists' journeys. - Strong use of digital media and social networks for promotion. - State and local support policies for sustainable tourism development and OCOP.	“Social media has helped Ha Giang cuisine reach many young customer groups” (Tourism marketing expert). “The OCOP certification policy creates favourable conditions for local speciality products to develop and have more opportunities to reach tourists” (Management agency).	- Views of food promotion videos increased by 40% in 2024. - Support a 10% tax reduction for green tourism businesses. - In 2023, according to Google's announcement, the number of visitors searching for Ha Giang increased to rank 4th in terms of number of searches after Thailand, Taiwan and Europe. - According to the <i>New York Times</i>, Ha Giang is ranked in the top 25/52 most attractive destinations in the world in 2023. Canadian travel newspaper <i>The Travel</i> voted Ha Giang as one of the 10 most beautiful destinations in Vietnam.
Challenge	- Competition from neighbouring mountainous provinces developing culinary tourism with similar resources and local cuisine. - The risk of commercialization causing loss of traditional identity and quality due to cultural import from many different sources. - The impact of climate change and natural disasters disrupt the supply of raw materials. - Lack of close coordination between tourism development and environmental and cultural protection.	“We are worried that traditional dishes are being transformed because of the tourist trend” (Local people). “Storms and rains have a great impact on crops and raw material output” (Local people).	20% of Shan Tuyet tea production will decrease due to the weather in 2024. - The number of tourists increases by 10% annually, compared to the underdeveloped infrastructure, putting pressure on the environment and tourist destinations.

Source: author synthesis

Developing culinary tourism in Ha Giang has great potential thanks to the uniqueness of the dishes and other cultural resources here, in addition to the majestic natural resources. However, to develop green and sustainably, Ha Giang

needs to improve infrastructure, enhance service quality, preserve culinary cultural values and strengthen promotional strategies to attract tourists. At the same time, there needs to be educational strategies, raising awareness of local people as well as tourists, in developing and moving towards green development in culinary tourism activities.

4.2. Ha Giang cuisine - the breath of Indigenous culture

The cuisine of the land at the head of the Fatherland imbued with the "soul and essence" of the highlands of Ha Giang, deeply reflects the cultural identity and unique traditions of each community. Besides the majestic but harsh natural landscape, this "blooming stone" land also attracts tourists with its culinary products that carry the "breath" of the sacred soul of highland culture; although rustic, but contains a unique flavour. All the characteristics of the land, from climate conditions, soil, unique processing and enjoyment methods, are completely "packaged" in special dishes closely associated with the life of the land and people here. The names of many dishes evoke the origin of the community or geographical area, accompanied by beliefs, customs and folk practices.

The skilful processing art combined with local ingredients from the rocky plateau has created typical dishes such as men men (steamed corn flour), thang co (traditional horse meat stew), thang den (sweet sticky rice cake), smoked meat, Chinese sausage, drinks that seem to be "cherished" in the middle of the vast mountains and forests, captivating people with corn wine and Shan Tuyet tea. In particular, some dishes are not only typical of an ethnic group but also symbols of an entire geographical region that only Ha Giang has: au tau porridge, buckwheat cake, mint honey, Thanh Van corn wine and Shan Tuyet Che La tea...

Every year, from mid-October, the rocky plateau is covered with the purple-pink colour of buckwheat flowers. This plant not only creates a poetic scene, adding beauty to Ha Giang in a colourful landscape painting but is also an important food crop for the people here; they process it into wine, making sweet and cool buckwheat cakes.

Like many northern mountainous provinces, some ethnic groups in Ha Giang province, such as Tay, Nung, and H'Mong, have a tradition of preserving meat by cutting it into large pieces, marinating it with some forest spices such as mac khen, doi seeds, ginger wind (mountain ginger) and then smoking it, helping to preserve it for a long time and creating a unique flavour. Smoked sausage is an indispensable dish on every holiday - finely chopped meat mixed with a little wine, honey, mac khen, and ginger is stuffed into skewers and placed on the kitchen shelf; when enjoying the dish, you can feel the fatty, rich taste of the meat and the aroma of the unique spices.

One can forget the cold of winter in the high rocky mountains when sitting with friends and relatives next to a pot of steaming thang co, fragrant with cardamom, and holding strong corn wine. Thanh Van corn wine, a speciality of the H'Mong people, is made from corn, fermented with leaves and spring water from high altitudes, and then distilled in wooden barrels.

The diversity in the culinary culture of the "grey stone land" is also enriched by the typical dishes of the ethnic groups here: men men, tau chua of the Hmong; lap meat of the Lo Lo; khau nhuc, five-colour sticky rice of the Tay; tofu stuffed with meat of the Nung; grilled buffalo skin of the La Chi; banh troi, banh dung mao of the Bo Y; croissants, banh oc of the Pa Then. These dishes clearly demonstrate the tradition and cultural exchange over time.

It can be seen that living in the typical landscape environment of the Rocky Mountains, the cuisine of the ethnic groups in Ha Giang shows the adaptation and maximum utilization of food resources; from there, forming local knowledge, ethnic knowledge in choosing ingredients, processing methods and eating behaviours. Community, sharing, taking advantage of preferential treatment and adapting to natural conditions are the basic characteristics of the eating behaviour culture of the ethnic groups here.

4.3. Results and discussion on the role of culinary tourism in creating sustainable experiences

Qualitative research using semi-structured interviews attracted the participation of 20 tourists who had experienced cuisine at food service establishments and cultural tourist attractions in Ha Giang in November 2024. The choice of

this method aimed to deeply exploit the feelings, attitudes and food consumption behaviors of tourists at the time they were directly interacting with the local culinary environment.

Research results show that local cuisine plays an important role in building a multidimensional and sustainable tourism experience, as it not only meets nutritional needs but also becomes a means of conveying culture, history and regional identity. Tourists have access to typical culinary values, thereby increasing understanding and respect for local cultural heritage. At the same time, the choice of using traditional ingredients and processing techniques contributes to preserving sustainable production methods, minimizing negative impacts on the environment.

It is noteworthy that tourists' preference for local specialties clearly demonstrates the trend of responsible culinary tourism, as they proactively seek out experiences that are truly connected to the destination instead of globalized or industrialized culinary products. This not only increases the local economic value but also promotes the preservation and promotion of culinary cultural values, thereby contributing to sustainable tourism development in terms of economy, society and environment.

In addition, comparing the culinary experience in Ha Giang with other destinations shows that the diversity in the way culinary tourism is organized and managed can directly affect the level of sustainability of the experience. Culinary tourism business models that are closely linked to the local community and prioritize the use of local ingredients have the potential to create positive spillovers for local economic development and ecological protection.

From a tourism management perspective, the study results highlight the importance of developing sustainability-oriented strategies for culinary tourism, including raising tourists' awareness of the value of local cuisine, encouraging service establishments to adopt sustainability standards, and promoting local community participation in the tourism value chain. These are key factors to maximize the role of culinary tourism in promoting sustainable tourism development.

The role of culinary tourism in sustainable tourism development is increasingly clearly affirmed through this study. Cuisine is not only a factor attracting tourists but also an essential means to convey and preserve local cultural identity while contributing to promoting sustainable community economic development. Diverse and unique culinary experiences help improve the overall quality of the tourism journey, increasing tourists' satisfaction and long-term attachment to the destination. Culinary tourism not only contributes to diversifying tourism products but is also an important tool to move towards a sustainable tourism model, harmonizing economic development, cultural preservation and environmental protection. This study provides important scientific evidence, serving as a basis for developing policies and strategies to effectively exploit the role of cuisine in the context of sustainable tourism development now and in the future.

4.4. Results and discussion on Ha Giang's culinary specialties as a cultural feature and symbol in creating green tourism experiences towards sustainable values

The study focuses on clarifying the important role of Ha Giang cuisine in shaping the green tourism experience while contributing to promoting sustainable tourism development in this northern mountainous region. Results collected from the tourist group show that most of them tend to choose and buy local culinary products as souvenirs, reflecting a deep interest in the unique cultural values conveyed through local cuisine. These products are not only diverse in types, from snacks to traditional dishes with symbolic meaning, but also contain cultural and historical values of the indigenous community. Based on the collected data, it shows that Ha Giang possesses rich and unique culinary resources, with many traditional dishes (from traditional processing methods to production and farming methods) and products certified by OCOP, contributing to enhancing the value and attractiveness of the destination. Along with the cultural diversity of 19 ethnic groups living in the area, it brings a rich culinary picture as well as cultural experiences associated with cuisine, creating a clear competitive advantage. This is demonstrated through the growth in the number of visitors experiencing cuisine in 2024 of 15% compared to 2023, summarized in Table 1, which is a strength for Ha Giang to develop green tourism with the participation of local cuisine in the tourist journey. In Ha Giang, specialties such as “thit treo gac bep”, “thang co”, “men men”, “au tau”, cardamom honey, mint honey, and

Che La snow tea are not only widely consumed but also become cultural symbols closely associated with the destination. Most tourists in the study prioritize culinary experiences with a strong Ha Giang identity instead of choosing popular or imported dishes, demonstrating the trend of seeking authenticity and originality in culinary tourism experiences. This highlights two key points:

Choosing local food helps visitors access and explore unique cultural values closely linked to the history and traditions of the local community.

Culinary experiences are seen as a way to authenticate the authenticity of the destination, contributing to refuting the notion that local food is just a commercialized product serving tourism without real cultural value.

This shows the essential role of cuisine not only in creating unique tourism products but also in contributing to promoting local economic development and promoting the image of the destination in the direction of green tourism.

In addition to the strengths of local cuisine that serve the development of green tourism, Ha Giang still has limitations. That is the current state of the weak transport infrastructure system, affecting the ability to access culinary tourism destinations in more remote areas, especially during the rainy season. The uneven level of service quality at tourist destinations in Ha Giang and the service skills of staff and workers in the tourism industry also negatively affect the experience of tourists, which is reflected in the 22% of surveyed visitors complaining about service quality and service skills. However, besides these strengths and limitations, it also opens up many opportunities for culinary tourism in Ha Giang to develop, thereby promoting the development of green tourism. The trend of developing green tourism and experiential tourism opens up many opportunities for Ha Giang to exploit clean agricultural products and local specialties combined with tourism. Support from tax incentives, OCOP product programs, and the use of social networks and digital media have helped expand the scope of promotion and attract young customers with high awareness of environmental protection and indigenous culture. The number of viewers of promotional videos about Ha Giang cuisine and promotional videos about Ha Giang tourism increased by 40%, and the search ranking of Ha Giang destinations on Google in 2023 ranked fourth globally, showing the outstanding development potential of green culinary tourism in Ha Giang. There are many opportunities for developing green tourism in Ha Giang through cuisine. However, Ha Giang also faces many challenges, such as competition from neighbouring mountainous provinces with similar culinary resources, the risk of commercialization causing the loss of traditional cultural values and the negative impact of climate change on raw material supply, such as Shan Tuyet tea output decreasing by 20% in 2024 compared to 2023 due to the impact of climate change. In addition, the lack of strategic linkages between stakeholders in the culinary tourism value chain reduces the effectiveness of product development, and the risk of overexploitation of local ingredients can harm the sustainability of raw material supply.

Ha Giang cuisine is not only a means for tourists to enjoy but also a cultural symbol and a tool for developing green tourism towards sustainability, and is an important factor in the strategy of raising awareness for local communities and the responsibility of visitors.

5. IMPLICATIONS

Based on the results of a comprehensive analysis of the role of local cuisine in green tourism development in Ha Giang, the study proposes strategic implications with high applicability in policy-making, destination management and sustainable tourism product development as follows:

Completing the green tourism infrastructure system integrating local culinary culture: Priority should be given to upgrading and expanding the transportation network connecting key culinary tourism destinations, especially in mountainous areas and areas with limited access, to ensure convenient and safe access for tourists. In addition, it is necessary to synchronously develop a system of environmentally friendly accommodation and food services, applying green standards in construction and operation (such as energy saving and sustainable waste treatment) to minimize ecological impacts while enhancing customer experience. At the same time, implementing specialized training programs on service skills, local culinary knowledge and sustainable tourism for the workforce at the destination to improve service quality, while preserving and transmitting the unique culinary culture.

Building a green culinary tourism value chain through multi-stakeholder linkage: Establishing a close network of linkages between farmers producing clean ingredients, traditional processing facilities, tourism businesses and management organizations to create an organic food supply chain that is transparent in origin and environmentally friendly. Developing more OCCOP-certified culinary products, especially encouraging and supporting the application of organic farming techniques, preserving indigenous plant varieties and traditional processing procedures to maintain the sustainability of natural resources while ensuring the quality and authenticity of culinary products.

Develop experiential tourism products associated with green cuisines, such as organic farm tours, traditional food preparation classes, and culinary and cultural events to diversify products, extend the length of stay, and enhance tourism-added value.

Preserving and promoting the value of local culinary culture as an intangible asset of the destination: Establishing programs to preserve, restore and promote typical traditional dishes, along with building a set of standards and quality control processes to limit excessive commercialization that fades the traditional cultural value of local dishes. In addition, organizing annual festivals and events to promote culinary culture to raise community awareness of traditional cultural values through local cuisine while attracting the participation of tourists who are conscious of preserving and experiencing local values.

Enhance the application of digital technology and multi-channel communication to promote green culinary tourism: Deploy targeted communication campaigns and use social networks, digital platforms and interactive technology to reach young tourist groups with high awareness of environmental protection and local experiences. Develop digital platforms that integrate information on green culinary tourism and provide transparent data on product origin, green destinations and environmentally friendly services to increase customer trust and attractiveness. Cooperate with international media units to enhance the position of destination brands while attracting diverse international tourist markets that tend to favour sustainable tourism products.

Complete the policy framework to support and manage green tourism development in a multi-sectoral integrated manner: Issue financial incentives (tax reduction, preferential loan support) for businesses and local communities implementing green tourism activities and preserving culinary culture. At the same time, build a system to monitor and evaluate the environmental and cultural impacts of culinary tourism activities and develop climate change response plans to ensure sustainable raw material sources and production activities.

Furthermore, it is necessary to promote inter-sectoral coordination between departments, sectors, localities and communities in planning and implementing strategies for sustainable destination development associated with green culinary tourism.

Enhance the capacity and awareness of local communities on green tourism and cultural preservation: Organize training programs to raise awareness on green tourism development, safe production and processing techniques, as well as sustainable customer service for local people and stakeholders. Encourage the active and responsible participation of local communities in tourism product development, management and monitoring of tourism activities to ensure harmony between economic development, cultural preservation and environmental protection.

6. CONCLUSION

The study has confirmed the pivotal role of local cuisine in developing green tourism destinations in Ha Giang through theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, the study expands the understanding of the intersection between culinary tourism and sustainable development - an aspect that has not been fully exploited before. The results show that local cuisine can be considered a strategic tool to promote sustainable tourism, contributing to minimizing environmental impacts while preserving cultural values. This finding adds a scientific basis to fill the gap in the literature on the role of cuisine in green tourism, emphasizing the importance of placing cuisine at the centre of research on responsible tourism. In particular, the study has highlighted that integrating local culinary culture into tourism development can create a green tourism model that harmonizes economic growth, cultural heritage preservation and environmental protection.

In practical terms, the study provides important implications for destination management and sustainable tourism policymaking. Exploiting local cuisine as a core tourism product has been shown to be an effective way to enhance tourist experiences and increase the competitive appeal of destinations while ensuring long-term sustainability. The results of the analysis show that focusing on developing culinary tourism not only brings economic benefits (through attracting tourists to spend on local services and products) but also contributes to strengthening the pride and cultural identity of the host community. Empirical evidence from Ha Giang can help managers orient green tourism strategies associated with cuisine, such as supporting the community to preserve and promote speciality dishes, building a sustainable food supply chain, and integrating green standards into culinary services.

The study thus provides practical value by proposing specific ways to promote the role of cuisine in sustainable tourism development in the locality and destinations with similar conditions. A notable contribution of the study is to clarify the close relationship between local culinary experiences and the responsible tourism behaviour of tourists. Based on the results of qualitative interviews and SWOT analysis, tourists, when immersed in local culinary experiences, often form a higher awareness of respecting the culture and environment of the destination. They tend to prioritize using local specialities and seek authentic experiences associated with the community instead of choosing industrial or globalized food services. This trend reflects the spirit of responsible tourism: tourists actively contribute to the local economy (through the consumption of local products) while encouraging the preservation of culinary heritage and minimizing negative impacts on the environment. The results of the study thus demonstrate that local culinary experiences can be a “catalyst” for promoting sustainable travel behaviour among tourists. This finding is in line with the general orientation of responsible tourism globally, where culinary culture is considered a focus to educate and guide tourists towards more sustainable choices during their journeys.

Despite many theoretical and practical contributions, the study still has some limitations that need to be objectively recognized:

Firstly, the scope of the study is limited to a specific destination, Ha Giang province, with its cultural characteristics and natural conditions. Therefore, the results obtained may not be sufficient to generalize to other destinations with different conditions.

Second, in terms of methodology, the study mainly used a qualitative approach (semi-structured interviews, field observations and SWOT analysis). This approach is suitable for exploring phenomena in depth but also implies subjectivity in data collection and analysis. The lack of quantitative data or a larger survey sample means that the reliability and representativeness of the results are limited, making the generalizability limited.

Finally, the study was cross-sectional at one point in time, so it was not possible to track changes in tourist behaviour over time. These limitations require that the research results be interpreted in a specific context, avoiding mechanical application to other contexts. Further studies can overcome this by expanding the geographical scope and combining quantitative methods or long-term studies to verify and supplement the findings of this study. Continuing to explore these directions will help increase the generalizability of the results while providing more scientific arguments for the development of green and sustainable culinary tourism in many diverse contexts.

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