Available on: https://jsshrs.ep-journals.org/ E-ISSN: 3051-3561, P-ISSN: 3051-3553

Journal of Social Science and Human Research Studies

Volume : 02 Issue : 11 November-2026

Ethnic Minority Food Heritage in Community-Based Tourism in the Northern Mountainous Region of Vietnam

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Published Date: November 23, 2026 **Article DOI: 10.65150/EP-jsshrs/V2E11/2026-27**

ABSTRACT:

Background: Food served in ethnic-minority homestays is simultaneously a tourism service, a livelihood resource and a carrier of local knowledge. Objective: This article examines how food heritage becomes part of community-based tourism in the northern mountainous region of Vietnam and what conditions might preserve community agency.

Methods: A purposive integrative review of 22 academic studies from food tourism, authenticity, minority tourism and upland livelihood research was organised by food-heritage layers, conversion processes and community outcomes.

Results: Four layers are distinguished: everyday subsistence food, festive and ritual food, hospitality meals, and commercial specialities. Selection, adaptation, narration and commodification connect these layers to visitor markets. Their possible consequences for knowledge transmission, cultural meaning and benefit sharing depend on community authority, ingredient supply, recognition of women's labour, contextual interpretation and customary boundaries. A conceptual framework and six testable propositions are presented.

Conclusion: Food heritage should be evaluated through who determines its presentation and who retains knowledge and benefits, rather than through a fixed test of culinary authenticity. The framework has not been empirically evaluated.

KEYWORDS: ethnic minority food heritage, community-based tourism, northern Vietnam, culinary authenticity, homestays, participation, cultural transmission.

1. INTRODUCTION

Meals are among the most immediate encounters between visitors and local households in community-based tourism. In mountain villages, the same kitchen may provide a family's everyday food, prepare ceremonial dishes and serve paying guests. Each setting assigns different meanings to ingredients, labour and hospitality. When a meal becomes a product, decisions about what to serve, who prepares it and what a visitor is told are also decisions about cultural representation and economic opportunity.

The northern mountainous region of Vietnam includes destinations such as Sa Pa, Mai Chau and Dong Van, where Hmong, Dao, Tay, Nung and Thai communities participate in homestays, markets and cultural tourism in varied ways. The 2019 population census recorded approximately 14.1 million people belonging to Vietnam's 53 ethnic minority groups, or 14.7% of the national population (General Statistics Office, 2020). The 2017 Law on Tourism frames community-based tourism in relation to local cultural values, community management and benefit; national policy also links the protection of minority cultural traditions with tourism development (National Assembly, 2017; Prime Minister, 2021). These commitments establish a policy context, not evidence that food-tourism revenues are equitably distributed.

Food-tourism studies consider authenticity, local identity and visitor experiences (Bessière, 1998; Sims, 2009; Ellis et al., 2018). Research on minority tourism in northern Vietnam instead foregrounds participation, inequality and representation (Michaud & Turner, 2006; Bott, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2020). Upland livelihood research shows that agricultural change affects what families can grow and eat (Bonnin & Turner, 2012). However, comparatively little attention has been given to the meal itself as heritage with knowledge holders, customary boundaries and potentially unequal returns.

The study addresses three questions: RQ1, how does scholarship characterise the relationship between food heritage and minority community-based tourism? RQ2, through which processes are household and ritual foods adapted for visitors? RQ3, which conditions may support transmission, meaningful representation and fairer benefit sharing? The contribution is a conceptual model grounded in published literature, not a new survey of households or a causal assessment of tourism projects.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Food, place and authenticity

Bessière (1998) treats local cuisine as a heritage resource through which rural places assert identity and create activity. Hall and Sharples (2003) distinguish trips motivated principally by food from visits in which eating is one part of a wider experience. Everett and Aitchison (2008) and

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Sims (2009) show how local food can connect visitors to production skills, regional identity and perceived authenticity. Yet these findings arise from settings whose producer organisations and food markets differ from many minority villages in Vietnam; they cannot simply be transferred as measured outcomes.

Authenticity is neither a permanent recipe nor an automatic property of a tourist label. Cohen and Avieli (2004) show that unfamiliar ingredients and food-safety expectations often produce mediation and modification. Mak et al. (2012) identify pressures of standardisation alongside demand for distinctiveness. Timothy and Ron (2013) connect heritage cuisine with identity, image and change. Avieli's (2013) ethnography in Hoi An demonstrates that menus marketed as local may differ substantially from residents' everyday meals. Together with Cohen (1988) and Xie (2011), this suggests investigating who authorises adaptation and the meanings attached to the result rather than treating all change as cultural loss.

2.2. Community authority and unequal participation

Community-based tourism promises local participation but does not ensure control over decisions. Scheyvens (1999) distinguishes economic, social, psychological and political empowerment, while Tosun (2000) shows how structural barriers restrict participation. Okazaki (2008) links participation with power redistribution and social capital. In Sa Pa, Michaud and Turner (2006) describe conflicting visions of tourism, Truong et al. (2014) identify barriers experienced by poorer residents, and Nguyen et al. (2020) document limited involvement in formal planning. Bott (2018) demonstrates the exclusionary potential of ethnic stereotypes, particularly for women; Vu (2020) critiques tourism development that marginalises minority cultural practices. Dang and Phan (2023) identify the influence of social capital on minority women's tourism participation. For culinary heritage, these studies raise the questions of menu control, remuneration for cooking and ownership of the cultural story surrounding a dish.

2.3. Livelihoods, narration and regional parallels

Upland food cannot be separated from farming. Bonnin and Turner (2012) show how hybrid-rice interventions in Lao Cai interact with household food security, costs and preferences. Krajangchom (2023) documents a Tai Lue initiative in northern Thailand in which a community worked with a chef to adapt foods for visitors, though outcomes were preliminary. These cases suggest that the local supply of ingredients and local control over change are distinct from the marketing appeal of a dish.

Related Vietnamese scholarship provides complementary, not food-specific, perspectives. Pham et al. (2025) examine brocade weaving as a minority cultural resource for tourism in northern mountains; the transferable issue is producer recognition, not a finding about cuisine. Nguyen and Nguyen (2026) discuss storytelling in heritage-tourism experience, while Phuong and Lam (2025) address community feedback in heritage communication in Hanoi. Vu and Nguyen (2026) connect heritage identity, memory and participation to cultural tourism. None assesses the culinary practices or benefit allocation in the communities examined here. Their bounded relevance is to how cultural meaning and community voices can be considered when food is presented to visitors.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Review design and corpus

The study uses an integrative, purposive review following the logic of Whittemore and Knafl (2005). Materials were identified through publisher and Crossref records, reference-list tracing and scholarly work on food tourism, culinary heritage, ethnic tourism, minority participation, homestays, Sa Pa and northern Vietnamese food systems. Academic books and peer-reviewed research were considered when they supplied a concept, observation or comparison relevant to the questions. Promotional accounts were excluded from the analytical corpus. The 22 selected works comprise nine on food tourism and heritage, seven on Vietnam's ethnic tourism and upland livelihoods, three on participation and empowerment, two on authenticity, and one neighbouring-country food case. National laws and statistics and the four complementary Vietnamese publications support contextual discussion but are not counted among the 22 studies.

3.2. Analytical procedure and limits

For each study, the research setting, design and claim were extracted into an evidence matrix (Table 1). A first coding pass identified practices by which food enters tourism: selection, adaptation, narration and commodification. A second pass examined three proposed outcomes: knowledge transmission, cultural meaning and benefit sharing. Cross-case interpretation then identified five conditions potentially affecting these relationships. Different source designs were not pooled statistically; the matrix is a structured synthesis rather than an effect-size comparison. No primary interviews, kitchen observations, market price audit or measurement of household revenue were undertaken. The six propositions formulated below remain untested.

Table 1. Evidence matrix of the 22 core studies

Study	Setting and method	Relevant analytical finding
Bessière (1998)	Rural France; conceptual	Local cuisine as identity and rural-development resource
Hall & Sharples (2003)	International; book chapter	Food as primary travel motive or supporting experience
Cohen & Avieli (2004)	International; conceptual	Visitor uncertainty generates adaptation and mediation
Everett & Aitchison (2008)	Cornwall; case study	Food tourism can sustain local skills and identity
Sims (2009)	England; interviews	Place-linked foods support perceived authenticity

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Study	Setting and method	Relevant analytical finding
Mak et al. (2012)	International; review	Globalisation creates standardisation and differentiation pressures
Timothy & Ron (2013)	International; conceptual	Heritage cuisines involve identity, authenticity and change
Avieli (2013)	Hoi An; ethnography	Tourist specialities may differ from residents' food
Ellis et al. (2018)	International; review	Cultural interpretation is central to food tourism research
Cohen (1988)	International; conceptual	Commoditised cultural forms may acquire new local meanings
Xie (2011)	Hainan; monograph	Authentication is negotiated by multiple tourism actors
Scheyvens (1999)	International; framework	Empowerment includes economic and political dimensions
Tosun (2000)	Developing countries; analysis	Structural constraints limit participation
Okazaki (2008)	Philippines; model	Power sharing and social capital shape participation
Michaud & Turner (2006)	Sa Pa; ethnography	Minority residents and institutions hold competing tourism visions
Bonnin & Turner (2012)	Lao Cai; fieldwork	Crop interventions reshape upland food preferences and security
Truong et al. (2014)	Sa Pa; interviews	Low-income residents face skills and capital constraints
Bott (2018)	Sa Pa; ethnography	Ethnic stereotypes can marginalise minority women
Nguyen et al. (2020)	Sa Pa; 33 interviews	Community voice was limited in tourism planning
Vu (2020)	Vietnam; critical study	Uncritical tourism promotion may alienate communities
Dang & Phan (2023)	Vietnam; case study	Social capital affects minority women's tourism participation
Krajangchom (2023)	Northern Thailand; action research	Community-led food adaptation is possible but outcomes were early

4. RESULTS

4.1. Four layers of food heritage

The synthesis distinguishes four layers of food heritage that differ in use, visibility and control. Everyday subsistence food concerns staples, techniques and ingredients linked to farming cycles. Illustrations include Hmong men men, Thai sticky rice and preserved or gathered foods; these should not be treated as uniform menus across groups. This layer depends on seed varieties, cultivation and household knowledge, and is therefore vulnerable to agricultural substitution (Bonnin & Turner, 2012). Festive and ritual food belongs to ceremonies, ancestors, marriage and seasonal celebrations. Five-coloured sticky rice associated with Tay and Nung occasions is one illustrative example; the right to prepare, explain or serve particular dishes must be established locally rather than inferred from the fact that they are visible during a festival (UNESCO, 2003, 2015).

The hospitality meal is food prepared for paying guests in homestays and village kitchens. It may draw on everyday or festive food but introduces requirements of safety, timing, menu choice and visitor expectations (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). The commercial speciality, such as packaged smoked meats, dried bamboo shoots or regional grain products, travels beyond the village as merchandise. This may expand income but also obscure the household or producer behind a generic regional label. The layers overlap: one ingredient can appear in everyday cooking, a guest meal and a packaged product. The analytical distinction concerns the social relationship under which it is produced and presented, not a fixed hierarchy of cultural worth.

Table 2. Layers of food heritage, holders and risks

Layer	Typical context	Knowledge holders	Main risk in tourism
Everyday food	Household staples, local crops, daily techniques	Households, cultivators, often women	Disappearing ingredients or unrecognised ordinary skills
Festive/ritual food	Offerings, celebrations and customary events	Elders, households, ritual specialists	Extraction from context; breach of customary limits
Hospitality meal	Homestay dining, host-guided cooking	Hosts and cooks, often women	Standardised menus and undervalued cooking labour

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Layer	Typical context	Knowledge holders	Main risk in tourism
Commercial speciality	Packaged food and broader retail	Producers, traders, business networks	Loss of attribution and unequal capture of value

4.2. Selection, adaptation, narration and commodification

Four processes connect these layers to visitor markets. Selection determines which dishes become visible. If choices are made mainly by tour operators or external promotional agencies, easily recognised or exoticised foods may be favoured over those considered important by the community (Michaud & Turner, 2006; Bott, 2018). Adaptation changes ingredients, preparation, presentation or serving practice. It can reduce unfamiliarity and address hygiene, yet a change commissioned by outsiders may have a different cultural status from one chosen by household cooks (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Krajangchom, 2023).

Narration determines the account attached to a dish: its name, maker, season, production conditions and relationship to ordinary or ceremonial life. A menu that simply calls a food exotic differs from an explanation provided by its knowledge holders. This problem resonates with heritage storytelling and the importance of community review found in other Vietnamese contexts (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2026; Phuong & Lam, 2025). Commodification assigns prices to meals, preparation experiences and packaged specialities. Payment is not inherently incompatible with heritage, but the distribution of returns and the authority to withhold culturally sensitive material remain essential questions (Cohen, 1988; Scheyvens, 1999).

An illustrative homestay arrangement would separate a source dish from its visitor-oriented variation. The host might explain that a recipe originally depended on a seasonal crop, identify the substitute used in a particular meal and credit the person who prepared it. If a dish is connected to a restricted rite, the host could explain its cultural place without offering the ceremonial preparation itself. This example illustrates a way to record decisions; it is not a practice observed or evaluated in the present review.

Table 3. Decision points in converting food heritage to tourism

Process	Key question	Indicative evidence for local review
Selection	Who decides which foods to offer?	Menu meeting records; cooks and elders consulted; excluded dishes documented
Adaptation	Who approves changes and why?	Recipe versions; food-safety decisions; household acceptance
Narration	Whose explanation accompanies the dish?	Source attribution; seasonal and customary context; community corrections
Commodification	Who receives payment and retains rights?	Prices and labour payments; supply contracts; limits on ceremonial use

4.3. Outcomes and conditions

Three outcomes are relevant but not directly measured in the reviewed northern-Vietnamese studies. Knowledge transmission concerns whether younger people continue to learn crop selection, preparation and associated social practices. Cultural meaning concerns whether a community recognises what is offered as a legitimate representation and retains the option not to sell some foods. Benefit sharing concerns who receives income and whether those providing ingredients, preparation and explanation are paid. Evidence from Sa Pa shows why returns cannot be assumed to follow automatically from visitor demand (Truong et al., 2014; Nguyen et al., 2020).

Five conditions mediate the likely outcomes. First, community control of selection and narration can make approval and correction possible. Second, a secure local ingredient supply ties dishes to viable food systems rather than an imported imitation. Third, payment and recognition for women's cooking labour make previously invisible services economically legible. Fourth, interpretation should explain provenance, preparation and appropriate cultural context instead of presenting food as an anonymous exotic object. Fifth, custodians must be able to set customary limits on ritual dishes and associated knowledge. These conditions are neither a validated index nor requirements asserted to hold identically in every ethnic community.

4.4. Conceptual framework and six propositions

Figure 1 depicts a directional model: four heritage layers enter tourism through four conversion processes; effects on knowledge, meaning and benefits depend on the five conditions. It is not assumed that all layers should become saleable products. Some heritage remains within households or ceremonial settings by choice. The model provides a common vocabulary for comparisons across differently situated communities while leaving authority and practice open to local definition.

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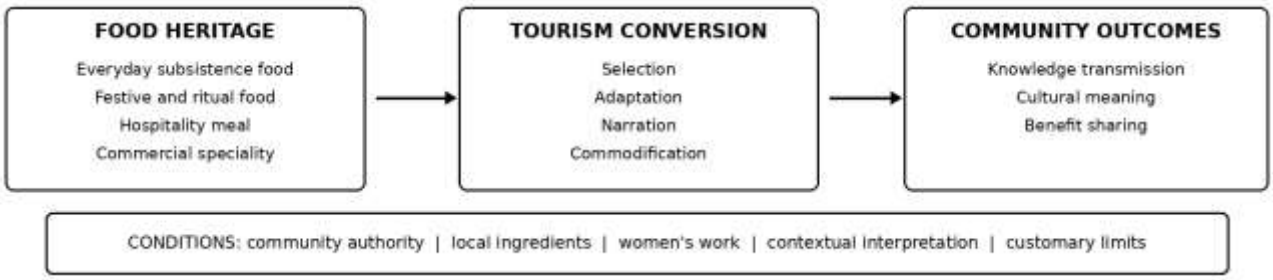

Figure 1. Food heritage conversion and community outcomes (author-developed conceptual synthesis)

Six propositions follow. P1: Hospitality meals connected to everyday and festive food will offer greater potential for knowledge transmission than menus based only on detached commercial specialities. P2: Community control over selection and narration will support recognition of the foods offered to visitors. P3: Community-authorised adaptation will protect perceived cultural meaning more effectively than externally imposed modification. P4: Continuity of locally sourced ingredients will support the everyday-food layer within tourism. P5: Recognition and payment for women's preparation work will increase the share of benefits reaching food-knowledge holders. P6: Community authority to define limits, accompanied by contextual explanation, will reduce inappropriate commercial use of ritual food. These are hypotheses for future empirical research, not associations estimated in this review.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Food heritage as governed knowledge

The principal conceptual contribution is to shift the unit of analysis from the tourist dish to the relationships through which food is produced, authorised and communicated. Studies of regional food emphasise identity and experiential value (Bessière, 1998; Sims, 2009), whereas the northern-Vietnamese literature demonstrates how apparently participatory tourism can distribute decision-making power unequally (Bott, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2020). The four-layer distinction exposes what a standard homestay menu can obscure: the food consumed by residents, foods reserved for ceremonial obligations, and products developed for external markets may have different knowledge holders and legitimate audiences. An adapted recipe is not automatically inauthentic. Avieli (2013) shows that tourist menus can differ from residents' meals, while Xie (2011) and Cohen (1988) treat authenticity and commodification as negotiated processes. Thus, a productive assessment asks whether adaptations are acknowledged, chosen with relevant practitioners and correctly represented. Related research on northern mountain brocade tourism (Pham et al., 2025) reinforces the cross-sector importance of identifying makers, but supplies no test of food-related effects. Work on heritage identity (Vu & Nguyen, 2026) similarly highlights the social dimension of place-related cultural value without measuring culinary knowledge in minority households.

5.2. Implications for community tourism practice

A community food-heritage inventory should distinguish food shared in public visitor activities from food retained for family or ritual settings. Homestay hosts could document the source of ingredients, named preparation knowledge, seasonal variation, requested adaptations and the explanation given to guests. Accounting should separate payments for food products, ingredients and cooking labour where feasible. These practices could make the contribution of women and smaller producers more visible and create records against which local claims of benefit sharing can be evaluated.

Tourism managers should not use a single emblematic dish as shorthand for all ethnic groups in the mountains. Nor should promotional labels claim that a product is ancient or unchanged without a traceable source. Community review of menu text, guides' explanations and marketing imagery can address problems that ordinary customer-satisfaction surveys may not detect. Ingredient availability also deserves coordination between tourism and agricultural programmes: a signature dish cannot support local livelihood continuity if its defining crops become unavailable or are purchased entirely from outside suppliers.

Visitor satisfaction alone is an insufficient measure of these objectives. A popular menu may receive favourable reviews even when a recipe has lost its agricultural connection or a major share of income flows to intermediaries. A limited evaluation could therefore compare menu provenance, ingredient purchasing records, cooks' remuneration, and the community's own assessment of what the food represents. This would distinguish commercial success from heritage continuity without assuming the two necessarily conflict.

5.3. Limitations and directions for testing

The source set is selective and draws particularly heavily on Sa Pa and on food-tourism studies conducted outside northern Vietnam. Some illustrated dishes were not investigated directly in the review's regional field material. The study contains no village interviews, kitchen observations, household income records or intergenerational learning measures. The four contextual Vietnamese studies are analogical support, not direct evidence about minority cuisine. Consequently, neither the comparative importance of the five conditions nor the effect of the proposed framework can be estimated from these documents.

Future multi-site research could compare households with different degrees of control over menus and narration, document ingredient sourcing, and follow how younger members learn preparation skills. Household accounts could separate who earns from guest meals, cooking demonstrations and sales of packaged foods. Interviews with customary knowledge holders could establish which foods may be shared, explained, adapted or withheld. Such studies would allow the six propositions to be evaluated without presuming that a single model captures the diversity of northern mountain communities.

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6. CONCLUSION

Food heritage in northern Vietnam's ethnic minority community-based tourism cannot be reduced to tourist menus or branded specialities. The literature permits a distinction among everyday food, festive and ritual food, hospitality meals and commercial products, and it identifies selection, adaptation, narration and commodification as processes that may alter their meaning and distribution of value. Community authority, ingredients, recognised labour, contextual explanation and customary limits are conditions requiring attention. The proposed framework links these dimensions to knowledge transmission, cultural meaning and benefit sharing. Its six propositions provide an agenda for field investigation rather than a demonstrated account of programme effectiveness. Treating food as heritage requires attending not only to what visitors consume, but also to who retains the ability to prepare, explain, change and benefit from it.

DECLARATIONS

Funding: This research received no external funding. Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest. Ethics: The review used published material and did not involve human participants. Data availability: All source material considered is identified in the reference list; no primary dataset was generated.

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