

REVIEW ARTICLE

Heritage cuisine and gastronomic tourism in Ecuador: a systematic review of cultural valorization strategies***Cocina patrimonial y turismo gastronómico en Ecuador: revisión sistemática de las estrategias de valorización cultural***Daliannis Rodríguez¹  , Edwin Antamba²   y Gilma S. Gallegos¹  ¹Universidad UTE, campus Manabí, Ecuador.²Escuela Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo, Ecuador.

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ABSTRACT

Heritage cuisine represents a fundamental dimension of intangible cultural heritage, encompassing knowledge, practices, ingredients, and symbolisms deeply rooted in territorial identities. This culinary legacy has emerged as a strategic axis for sustainable tourism development in Ecuador. The objective of the present study was to analyze the cultural valorization strategies of heritage cuisine in Ecuador within the framework of gastronomic tourism, to identify predominant conceptual approaches, notable practices, local stakeholder participation, and existing research gaps in the field. A qualitative methodology based on the SPIDER model was adopted, which allowed for a structured approach to the search, selection, and analysis of studies published between 2010 and 2024, resulting in a final synthesis of 15 works. The findings reveal a growing interest in culinary patrimonialization as a tourism resource, emphasizing traditional recipes, the evocation of food memory, and the design of gastronomic routes. Key stakeholders in the process were identified—governments, communities, the private sector, and universities—and notable initiatives such as food fairs, heritage inventories, origin certifications, and the training of local cooks were highlighted. Nevertheless, significant gaps remain, including limited research in Amazonian and Afro-descendant regions, scarce incorporation of gender perspectives, and weak institutional coordination. It is concluded that, although cultural valorization strategies are making meaningful progress, it is essential to foster a more inclusive, intersectional, and participatory research agenda to enhance the sustainability and authenticity of heritage cuisine as a cultural asset and a driver of development.

Keywords: heritage cuisine, gastronomic tourism, intangible cultural heritage, cultural valorization, food identity, Ecuador.

RESUMEN

La cocina patrimonial constituye una dimensión esencial del patrimonio cultural inmaterial, al integrar saberes, prácticas, ingredientes y simbolismos enraizados en las identidades territoriales. En Ecuador, este legado culinario ha comenzado a posicionarse como un eje estratégico para el desarrollo turístico sostenible. El presente estudio tuvo como objetivo, analizar las estrategias de valorización cultural de la cocina patrimonial en Ecuador en el marco del turismo gastronómico, a fin de identificar enfoques conceptuales predominantes, prácticas destacadas, participación de actores locales y vacíos de investigación en el campo. Se adoptó una metodología cualitativa basada en el modelo SPIDER, que permitió estructurar la búsqueda, selección y análisis de estudios publicados entre 2010 y 2024, con un total de 15 trabajos incluidos en la síntesis final. Los hallazgos muestran una creciente preocupación por la patrimonialización culinaria como recurso turístico, con énfasis en el uso de recetas tradicionales, la evocación de la memoria alimentaria y el diseño de rutas gastronómicas. Asimismo, se identificaron actores clave en el proceso —gobiernos, comunidades, sector privado y universidades— y se destacaron iniciativas como ferias, inventarios patrimoniales, certificaciones de origen y formación de cocineros locales. No obstante, persisten vacíos relevantes: limitada investigación en regiones amazónicas y afrodescendientes, escasa inclusión de perspectiva de género y baja articulación institucional. Se concluye que, si bien las estrategias de valorización cultural avanzan de forma significativa, es necesario promover una agenda de investigación más inclusiva, interseccional y participativa que fortalezca la sostenibilidad y autenticidad de la cocina patrimonial como bien cultural y motor de desarrollo.

Palabras clave: cocina patrimonial, turismo gastronómico, patrimonio cultural inmaterial, valorización cultural, identidad alimentaria, Ecuador.



INTRODUCTION

Heritage cuisine constitutes an emblematic manifestation of people's intangible cultural heritage, integrating practices, knowledge, techniques, local ingredients, and symbolism rooted in history and collective identity. These food expressions, far from being simple consumption habits, shape complex symbolic and social universes that connect communities to their territories, memories, and worldviews (González et al., 2021; Unigarro, 2010). In this sense, culinary traditions reflect historical processes of cultural appropriation and constitute mechanisms of resistance to the food homogenization imposed by globalization (Pagán et al., 2016).

In Latin America, the revaluation of traditional cuisine has been driven by public policies, social movements, and cultural tourism projects, in a context where gastronomic tourism is emerging as a strategy for sustainable development and the safeguarding of intangible heritage (Apolo et al., 2023; Chango et al., 2022; Jiménez-Beltrán et al., 2016). Ecuador, a megadiverse and plurinational country, has a gastronomic wealth reflecting its ecological and sociocultural diversity. From Andean and Amazonian culinary knowledge to the Afro-descendant traditions of the coast, Ecuadorian cuisine presents a complex network of preparations, ingredients, and cultural meanings that have been constructed intergenerationally (Herrera et al., 2020; Unigarro et al., 2014).

Despite this richness, traditional cuisines have remained on the periphery of official heritage discourses for decades, focused on monuments, dances, or festivities. However, efforts to recognize and preserve these food practices as cultural heritage have intensified in recent years, both from the State and local organizations, universities, and community entrepreneurs. (Sosa-Sosa & Thomé-Ortiz, 2020, 2021a, 2021b; Pazos-Barrera, 2019).

Gastronomic tourism has been one of the vehicles through which these strategies have been articulated, allowing the visibility of culinary knowledge and its integration into regional economic circuits (Thompson et al., 2021; Romero-Corral, 2018). Several studies have explored these dynamics in the Ecuadorian context. For example, Herrera et al. (2020) analyze how traditional cuisines have been reinterpreted in community-based tourism initiatives in the Central Highlands. Chango et al. (2022) discuss appropriating ancestral culinary elements in constructing tourist routes. Jiménez-Beltrán et al. (2016) examine the discourses on authenticity and experience in gastronomic valorization in Quito and at the national level.

Despite these valuable contributions, there is currently no systematic review that integrates the disparate findings, identifies the theoretical approaches used, and highlights the gaps in the literature on the topic. This systematic review is therefore justified by its potential to offer a critical and integrative perspective on the processes of cultural valorization of Ecuadorian heritage cuisine in the context of gastronomic tourism.

Using a qualitative approach, we propose a comprehensive examination of the strategies developed, the actors involved, the social and symbolic impacts, and the tensions that emerge in the processes of food heritage. Thus, this work aimed to analyze the strategies for culturally valuing heritage cuisine in Ecuador within the framework of gastronomic tourism, to identify predominant conceptual approaches, notable practices, the participation of local actors, and research gaps in the field.

METHODOLOGY

Study design

This article was developed using a qualitative systematic review methodological approach, aimed at identifying, evaluating, and critically interpreting existing studies on cultural valorization strategies for heritage cuisine in the context of gastronomic tourism in Ecuador. Considering the study object's exploratory, interpretive, and sociocultural nature, it was deemed pertinent to employ the SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type) model, widely recommended in qualitative research (Cooke et al., 2012).

Based on this model, the following components were defined to guide the formulation of the search and study selection strategy: (S) Sample: studies conducted in Ecuador that address experiences, cases, or analyses of traditional cuisine, food heritage, and gastronomic tourism; (PI) Phenomenon of Interest: processes of culinary heritage and their articulation with tourism and territorial development dynamics; (D) Design: qualitative methodologies such as case studies, ethnographies, theoretical reviews, public policy analyses, or interviews with key stakeholders; (E) Evaluation: focused on cultural valorization strategies, associated heritage discourses, and their symbolic and social impact on communities and territories; and (R) Research type: both qualitative studies and mixed and theoretical research were considered. This structuring made it possible to establish a solid framework to delimit the documentary universe and ensure the relevance of the studies included in the review.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria were defined to ensure the analyzed publications' relevance, pertinence, and quality. Empirical and theoretical studies published between 2010 and 2024 that explicitly addressed the topic of heritage cuisine, traditional gastronomy, or gastronomic tourism in Ecuador, framed within processes of heritage recognition, cultural valorization, sustainability, or local identity, were included. Articles in Spanish and English published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, academic book chapters, graduate theses, and

institutional documents with academic support were accepted. On the other hand, works that addressed Ecuadorian gastronomy from a purely nutritional perspective, without considering its heritage or tourism dimensions, as well as opinion pieces or journalistic reports that were not peer-reviewed, were excluded.

Search strategy

The literature search was conducted between February and April 2025 in various academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Additionally, thesis repositories and institutional publications from Ecuadorian universities were consulted. Boolean combinations of keywords in Spanish and English were used, such as: “heritage cuisine” OR “traditional gastronomy” AND “Ecuador”; “gastronomic tourism” AND “cultural valorization”; “food heritage” AND “community tourism”; “culinary heritage” AND “Ecuador” AND “food tourism.”

Study selection process

The search results were managed using Zotero software, allowing for organization and eliminating duplicates. Subsequently, an initial filter was performed by title and abstract, followed by a comprehensive reading of the selected full texts. Each study was assessed for its thematic and methodological relevance to the review objectives. The selection process was carried out by two researchers independently, and in cases of discrepancy, a third opinion was sought to ensure consistency.

Study Identification and Selection Process

This study followed the guidelines of the PRISMA declaration (Figure 1). During the search phase, three academic databases were consulted: Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and Google Scholar. A total of 1,263 records were retrieved and distributed as follows: 59 articles from Scopus, 54 from WoS, and 1,150 from Google Scholar. A subsequent filtering process was conducted, eliminating duplicate records and those not directly related to the object of study—heritage cuisine and gastronomic tourism in Ecuador— and reducing the number of records to 1,100.

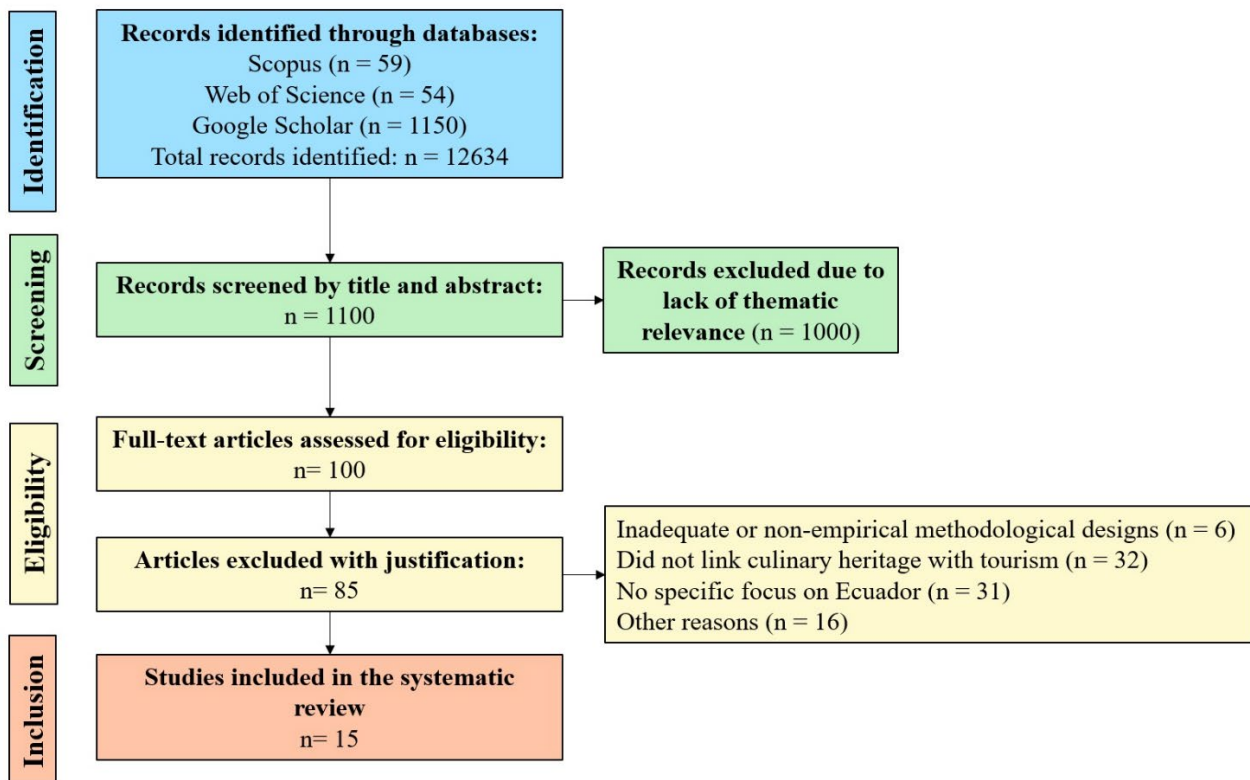


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart of the selection process for studies included in the systematic review on heritage cuisine and gastronomic tourism in Ecuador.

In the screening stage, titles and abstracts were read, allowing us to exclude 1,000 papers that did not meet the inclusion criteria. As a result, 100 articles were selected for full-text review. Of these, 85 were discarded for not meeting the previously defined methodological, geographical, or thematic criteria.

Finally, 15 studies that met the eligibility criteria were selected for inclusion in the qualitative synthesis. These works form the basis of this review’s analysis and discussion, as they directly address aspects related

to heritage gastronomy and its integration into Ecuador's tourism offering with an academically and methodologically sound approach.

Data extraction and analysis

Once the relevant studies were selected, an analysis matrix was developed to systematize the relevant information. The analysis categories included: year of publication, type of document, region or location of the study, objectives, theoretical approach, actors involved, valorization strategies described, type of tourism intervention, and main findings. A thematic synthesis approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008) was used for the qualitative content analysis, which identified recurring patterns, predominant discourses, and research gaps. This technique, typical of qualitative reviews, facilitates the grouping of emerging themes beyond a priori categories, while respecting the inductive nature of the available evidence.

To ensure the rigor of the review, qualitative evaluation criteria were applied that considered the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the included studies, following the recommendations of Guba and Lincoln (1985). Each article was examined for the clarity of its objectives, methodological coherence, justification of the theoretical approach, adequacy of sampling, and data analysis. This evaluation allowed the quality of the evidence to be weighted based on its contribution to the phenomenon of interest, classifying studies as high, medium, or low quality, depending on their level of consistency and analytical depth. Low-quality studies were excluded from the final analysis to ensure the robustness of the thematic synthesis.

Ethical considerations

Since this research was based exclusively on the analysis of secondary sources, it did not involve contact with human subjects or manipulation of sensitive data, so the approval of an ethics committee was not required. However, the appropriate use of the information was guaranteed, respecting the intellectual property of the reviewed authors and citing sources according to academic standards.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

General characterization of the included studies

The systematic review included 15 studies published between 2010 and 2023 (Table 1), all related to the cultural valorization of heritage cuisine in Ecuadorian tourism. This documentary sample is composed of diverse types of sources, reflecting both the multidisciplinary nature of the topic and the variety of academic dissemination formats that have addressed it. In terms of document type, original scientific articles predominate (n=9), followed by academic theses (n=2), books or book chapters (n=3), and one doctoral thesis. This diversity represents an active academic community where empirical, theoretical, and cultural systematization approaches converge.

Regarding temporal distribution, a progressive concentration of publications is observed between 2018 and 2023, when 9 of the 15 works (60%) were developed. This increase suggests a growing interest of academia and public institutions in recognizing the potential of heritage cuisine as a tourism, cultural, and economic resource, especially within the framework of territorial development and post-pandemic sustainability policies. However, previous studies that constitute foundational references in understanding traditional food systems were also incorporated, such as the work of Unigarro (2010) and Unigarro et al. (2014).

Regarding the language of the publications, all the documents analyzed were written in Spanish, which is consistent with the territorial context of the analysis and reinforces the local and regional nature of the knowledge produced. However, developing bilingual or English-language works is a future opportunity to allow greater international visibility of Ecuadorian culinary heritage.

Geographically, the included studies are mainly distributed in the Sierra (n=7) and Costa (n=3) regions, with a particular concentration in the city of Quito, where more than half of the research is located (n=8). This urban approach responds, in part, to the centrality of Quito's historic center as an icon of tangible and intangible heritage declared by UNESCO.

However, studies are also reported on Santa Elena, the Galapagos Islands, Manabí, and the national context. This demonstrates an incipient effort to decentralize academic production to other regions with valuable cultural and gastronomic assets. At the territorial level, gaps are still identified in the Amazon region, which could be explored in future research.

Regarding the authors' institutions of affiliation, there is evidence of significant participation from Ecuadorian universities such as the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar (UASB), the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador (PUCE), and the Escuela Politécnica del Litoral (ESPOL). Contributions are also recorded from public entities such as the Ministry of Tourism and heritage organizations, reinforcing the inter-institutional nature of the approach to heritage gastronomy. These institutions contribute through academic research and developing public policies and technical proposals with a territorial impact.

Table 1. Summary of the results of the systematic review on heritage gastronomy and its integration into tourism in Ecuador.

No.	Authors (year)	Study location	Document type	Results main	Conclusions	Quality of the evidence
1	Sosa-Sosa & Thomé-Ortiz (2020)	Quito	Original article	Poor articulation between heritage restoration and local agriculture	Local commerce is proposed to connect tourism and agri-food	High
2	Sosa-Sosa & Thomé-Ortiz (2021a)	Quito	Original article	The value of culinary nostalgia in the offering of local food spots ('Huecas')	Food memory is a strategy to attract tourism	High
3	Romero-Corral (2018)	Quito	Original article	Proposed gastronomic route in the historic center	Gastronomy can be the backbone of heritage tourism	Average
4	Pazos-Barrera (2019)	Quito	Master's thesis	Registration of traditional recipes	Claiming cuisine as a living cultural expression	Average
5	Apollo et al. (2023)	Saint Helena	Original article	Spending tourists are bound to experience gastronomic	Local cuisines can boost sustainable tourism	High
6	González et al. (2021)	Galapagos	Original article	Product registration of fishing boats as part of the cultural heritage	Urgency to protect heritage marine resources and the knowledge of fishing vessels	Average
7	Pagán et al. (2016)	Ecuador (Cubilán)	Original article	Archaeological evidence of corn use in the 9th millennium BC	Historical relevance of corn in Ecuadorian food identity	High
8	Unigarro (2010)	National	Academic book	Cultural mapping of food heritage	Symbolic appreciation of traditional cuisine in Ecuador	Average
9	Unigarro et al. (2014)	National	Technical book	Circuit analysis of food from farm to stove	Need to integrate knowledge traditional to the political public	Average
10	Pacheco (2014)	Saw	Book chapter	Cultural importance of the potato in culinary practices	Its use is proposed as a symbol of regional identity	Average
11	Thompson et al. (2021)	Ecuador	Doctoral thesis	Heritage in traditional markets	An integrated heritage and tourism management model is proposed	High
12	Sosa-Sosa & Thomé-Ortiz (2021b)	Quito	Original article	Local tourists value traditional food for the nostalgia it evokes	The emotional connection with heritage food strengthens the tourist experience	High
13	Jiménez-Beltrán et al. (2016)	Quito / national	Original article	The gastronomic experience improves the perception of the tourist destination	Food reinforces the cultural identity of the tourist offer	High
14	Herrera et al. (2020)	Rural Manabí	Original article	Women bearers of traditional culinary knowledge	Gender recognition is necessary in cultural gastronomic valorization strategies	High
15	Chango et al. (2022)	Rural mountain range	Original article	Designing tourist routes from ancestral cuisine	Traditional cuisine can strengthen endogenous cultural tourism	High

The studies included in this systematic review provide an empirical and conceptual basis for understanding the multiple dimensions of Ecuador's culinary heritage and its links to identity, territory, gender, and sustainable tourism development.

The systematic review highlights the diversity of approaches and topics addressed regarding heritage gastronomy in Ecuador and its progressive integration into the country's tourism offering. The most represented category in the reviewed studies is "culinary heritage", particularly the recognition of cuisine as intangible cultural heritage, present in 11 of the 20 studies considered (Table 2). This finding reflects a strong concern for the symbolic and material preservation of traditional food practices and responds to a regional trend in Latin America to reclaim the cultural value of ancestral culinary knowledge in the face of food homogenization processes driven by globalization. Including subtopics such as traditional recipes (n=9) and the documentary record of culinary knowledge (n=6) demonstrates an effort to transform cooking into a mechanism for cultural safeguarding, within the framework of heritage policies promoted by public institutions and local communities.

On the other hand, the category of "gastronomic tourism" emerges as a strategic axis for cultural valorization and territorial revitalization, evidenced by the prominent presence of codes such as the tourist experience based on traditional food (n=10) and the positioning of local food spots ('Huecas') as tourist destinations (n=8). These results indicate that gastronomy has ceased to be a secondary component of the tourist experience and has become a primary attraction, with high potential for cultural differentiation, job creation, and revitalization of local economies. However, although the design of gastronomic routes appears in five studies, there is still weak national-scale planning to articulate sustainable, inclusive, and competitive gastronomic circuits.

Table 2. Thematic categories and subtopics associated with the results on heritage gastronomy and its integration into tourism in Ecuador.

Category theme	Code (subtopic)	Frequency
Patrimonialization culinary	Using recipes traditional	9
	Registration and documentation of culinary knowledge	6
	Cuisine as an intangible cultural heritage	11
	Heritage food urban	5

Category theme	Code (subtopic)	Frequency
Gastronomic tourism	Route design gastronomic	5
	Local food spots (' <i>Huecas</i> ') as a tourist destination	8
	Tourist experience based on traditional food	10
	Local tourism with a culinary focus	4
Identity and food memory	Nostalgia and affection in food	7
	Cuisine as a regional identity marker	9
	Symbolic value of food	6
	Food and religiosity (e.g., convent cuisine)	3
Country-city / territory relationship	Disconnection between producers and restaurants	5
	Local commerce as a sustainable alternative	4
	Production of local agri-food	6
Public policies and cultural management	Institutional proposals for the heritage recognition of cuisine	7
	Inclusion of gastronomy in national tourism plans	6
	Lack of integration between ministries (culture, tourism)	3
Gender and transmission intergenerational	Role of women as guardians of culinary knowledge	4
	Food education based on family traditions	3
Sustainability and local development	Gastronomy as an economic engine for the community	6
	Sustainable practices in food production	3
	Intercultural approach in tourism development	4

One aspect worth highlighting is the strength of the symbolic and emotional component surrounding “food identity and memory”, where subthemes such as nostalgia and affection associated with food (n=7) and cuisine as a marker of regional identity (n=9) stand out. These results are especially relevant for understanding why heritage gastronomy is so effective as a tourist attraction. It activates memories, affections, and a sense of belonging, strengthening the bond between visitors and territories. Likewise, although less frequently, the relationship between food and religiosity (n=3) appears, evidenced in studies on convent cuisine and traditional festivals, opening up possibilities for deeper ethnographic and symbolic approaches.

Several studies identified a structural weakness in the “countryside-city/territory relationship” category, where the persistent disconnect between rural producers and urban restaurants (n=5) stands out. This gap, resulting from processes of agri-food dislocation, limits the consolidation of sustainable heritage food systems and directly affects the authenticity of tourism products. Although alternatives such as local trade (n=4) or the promotion of local agri-food production (n=6) are proposed, an intersectoral approach is required that articulates value chains from the territory to the table, integrating productive, gastronomic, cultural, and tourism stakeholders.

Regarding the institutional dimension, the category “public policies and cultural management” presents mixed results. While there are institutional proposals for the heritage recognition of cuisine (n=7) and some studies document the inclusion of gastronomy in tourism plans (n=6), the lack of effective coordination between government entities, particularly the ministries of culture, tourism, and agriculture, is a significant limitation (n=3). This institutional fragmentation hinders the implementation of comprehensive gastronomic valorization policies. It raises the need for more robust regulatory frameworks that recognize the cross-cutting value of food as a cultural, economic, and territorial asset.

It is observed that the categories “gender and intergenerational transmission” and “sustainability and local development” are underdeveloped in the literature analyzed, despite their enormous potential. Only four studies address the role of women as guardians of culinary knowledge, and only three incorporate food education in family contexts. This represents an opportunity for future research on cooking as a space for female agency, intergenerational inheritance, and cultural resilience. Likewise, subtopics such as interculturality in tourism development (n=4) or sustainable food production practices (n=3) should be more explicitly considered in formulating cultural valorization strategies, especially in contexts of high biocultural diversity such as Ecuador.

Table 3 presents a comparative analysis of the systematized information that demonstrates the theoretical and methodological richness of the studies included in the review and their main contributions and gaps. This synthesis reveals common patterns surrounding the study of heritage gastronomy in Ecuador and allows for conclusions about the state of knowledge in this field.

One of the first elements to highlight is the diversity of theoretical approaches present in the studies. Frameworks linked to food heritage, the anthropology of taste, cultural memory, and cultural tourism predominate. This conceptual variety allows us to approach heritage gastronomy as a complex phenomenon that articulates the symbolic, the productive, and the touristic. For example, studies such as those by Sosa-

Sosa & Thomé-Ortiz (2020, 2021a, 2021b) address the link between traditional cuisine and emotions from an anthropological perspective, while works such as those by Thompson et al. (2021) focus on popular markets as nodes of urban heritage. Similarly, there is a growing concern to integrate historical (Pagán et al., 2016), agri-food (Unigarro et al., 2014), and gender (Herrera et al., 2020) dimensions in the understanding of culinary heritage.

Regarding the methods used, most studies employ qualitative approaches, highlighting the use of semi-structured interviews, case studies, narrative analysis, and ethnography, consistent with the interpretive nature of the object of study. Some studies incorporate mixed or quantitative methods, as in the case of Apolo et al. (2023) and Jiménez-Beltrán et al. (2016), who apply surveys and factor analysis to measure the impact of gastronomy on the tourist experience. In contrast, cultural mapping as a methodological technique appears in studies with a territorial and systemic focus, such as those by Unigarro (2010) and Unigarro et al. (2014). Despite this diversity, it is notable that several studies acknowledge methodological limitations, such as the lack of data triangulation, small sample sizes, or lack of empirical validation, highlighting the need to strengthen the methodological robustness of future research. The analysis of the level of analysis reveals a clear bias toward micro-level studies ($n = 8$), focusing on specific cities such as Quito, Manabí, or rural Andean communities. This reflects a concern for understanding phenomena from a local perspective, which is pertinent given the territorialized nature of culinary heritage. However, studies with meso-level approaches ($n = 5$), such as those examining tourist routes or gastronomic events, and macro-level approaches ($n = 2$), such as archaeological and cartographic studies addressing national or pre-Columbian processes, are also included. This balance of scales allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. However, there is a lack of comparative studies across regions of the country or different scales of intervention.

Table 3. Comparative synthesis of approaches, methods, and contributions and results on heritage gastronomy and its integration into tourism in Ecuador.

No.	Authors	Approach theorist	Method used	Level of analysis	Contributions main	Limitations recognized
1	Sosa-Sosa & Thomé-Ortiz (2020)	Heritage food urban	Semi-structured interviews and discourse analysis	Micro (Quito - Local food spots ('Huecas'))	Evidence of disconnection between tourism and local production	Exhibition limited to formal restoration
2	Sosa-Sosa & Thomé-Ortiz (2021a)	Anthropology of taste and nostalgia	Interviews with local tourists + analysis of narrative	Micro (Quito)	Identifies nostalgia as a motivation for traditional consumption	Study limited to local tourists
3	Romero-Corral (2018)	Cultural tourism and planning	Review of technical proposals and documents	Meso (CH Quito)	Proposes gastronomic routes as a resource for heritage tourism	Not applicable to empirical technique validation
4	Pazos-Barrera (2019)	Convent patrimonialization	Document analysis + interviews with carriers	Micro (Quito)	Revalues traditional convent recipes as part of history	Approach restricted to the religious and urban
5	Apollo et al. (2023)	Economy local tourist	Visitor surveys and economic analysis	Meso (Santa Elena)	Links gastronomic spending with tourism sustainability	Does not address values symbolic of the kitchen
6	González et al. (2021)	Biocultural heritage	Ethnographic record + interviews with fishermen	Meso (Galapagos)	It links fishing knowledge with gastronomy as coastal heritage	Scope limited to one type of resource
7	Pagán et al. (2016)	Food history	Archaeology and residue analysis	Macro (pre-Columbian Ecuador)	Reaffirms corn as an axis of food identity	directly linked to current tourism
8	Unigarro (2010)	Cultural heritage and food memory	Cultural cartography and bibliographic review	Macro (national)	Highlights food as a symbol and node of cultural identity	Lack of recent empirical updating
9	Unigarro et al. (2014)	Systems agri-food heritage	Cultural mapping and interviews	Macro (national)	It systematizes the farm-hearth link as an axis of memory and sustainability	It does not go into depth on tourism as an articulator
10	Pacheco (2014)	Heritage food Andean	Analysis ethnographic + cultural review	Micro (Central Sierra)	Associates potato cultivation with identity and territorial belonging	It does not propose articulation with tourism policy
11	Thompson et al. (2021)	Patrimonialization of markets	Case study + interviews with merchants	Micro (popular markets)	Proposes an asset management model from traditional markets	Poor connection with public policies
12	Sosa-Sosa & Thomé-Ortiz (2021b)	Culinary identity urban	Narrative analysis and interviews	Micro (Quito)	Traditional food activates emotional memories and symbolic value	Need for a larger demographic sample
13	Jiménez-Beltrán et al. (2016)	Experiential tourism	Visitor surveys and factor analysis	Meso (cultural events with food)	Shows that food strengthens a positive perception of the destination	Longitudinal or ethnic analysis is missing
14	Herrera et al. (2020)	Tourism and gender	Interviews with traditional women cooks	Micro (rural Manabí)	It highlights the role of women as transmitters of culinary knowledge	Limited to testimonies without triangulation
15	Chango et al. (2022)	Endogenous cultural tourism	Tourism product design and interviews	Meso (Andean rural communities)	Structure tourist routes based on ancestral cuisine	Requires evaluation of the actual implementation

The main contributions of the studies analyzed revolve around the valorization of culinary knowledge, the proposal of heritage management models, the design of gastronomic routes, and the identification of the symbolic role of food in cultural identity. Some works, such as that of Chango et al. (2022), offer applied proposals for the development of tourism products based on ancestral cuisine, while others, such as Pazos-Barrera (2019) or Pacheco (2014), contribute by recovering specific culinary memories. Overall, the review reveals a consensus regarding the potential of gastronomy as an axis for local economic reactivation, strengthening identity, and promoting more authentic and sustainable cultural tourism.

However, common limitations in these studies include poor coordination with public policies, fragmentation among stakeholders (producers, managers, restaurateurs), a lack of longitudinal analysis, and the underrepresentation of variables such as ethnicity, gender, interculturality, and environmental sustainability. These gaps represent clear opportunities for future lines of research that could more comprehensively address the links between heritage, food, territory, and social equity.

The comparative synthesis reveals a growing field of study with theoretical and empirical contributions, but also pending challenges regarding methodology, institutions, and a comprehensive approach. Developing interdisciplinary research, with community participation and an action-oriented approach, will be necessary to consolidate heritage gastronomy as a structural axis of sustainable tourism in Ecuador.

The Venn diagram (Figure 2) visualizes the intersections between the main theoretical approaches used in studies on heritage gastronomy and its integration into tourism in Ecuador. Three predominant categories were identified: cultural/heritage approaches, tourism and planning approaches, and memory and identity-centered approaches. The cultural/heritage group encompasses the most significant number of studies. These works focus on the revaluation of gastronomy as an element of intangible heritage, emphasizing its role within cultural systems and its ability to represent territories. This includes research highlighting the importance of traditional recipes, heritage agri-food systems, and the symbolic elements of cuisine in historical and community contexts.

The tourism and planning approach, meanwhile, focuses on articulating gastronomy with tourism products, routes, economic sustainability strategies, or territorial planning. This approach tends to be more present in applied studies, focusing on rural communities or destinations with tourism potential, where components such as tourism spending, event planning, or the design of culinary experiences are analyzed.

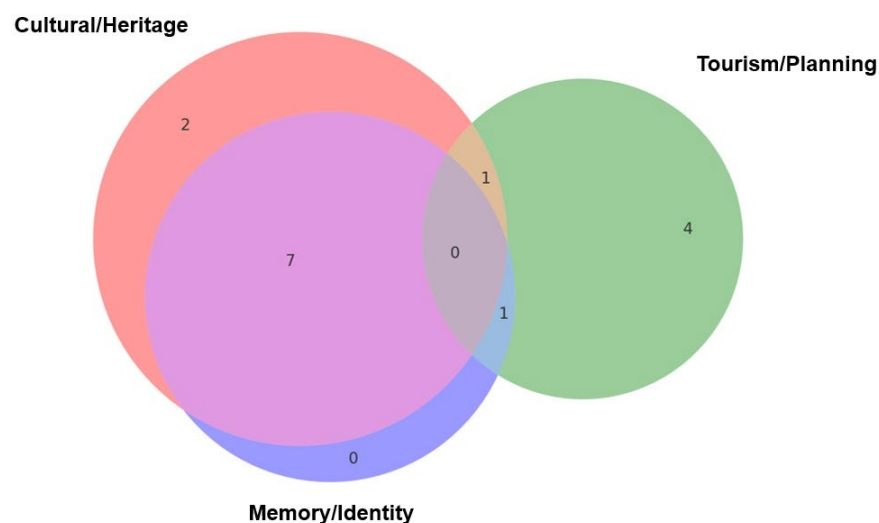


Figure 2. Venn diagram for the main theoretical approaches used in studies on heritage gastronomy and its integration into tourism in Ecuador.

The memory and identity approach is represented in works that examine how gastronomy activates affective memories, ancestral practices, or intergenerational bonds. This perspective considers food not only as an economic or cultural resource but as a means of narrating stories, experiences, and belongings.

The Venn diagram also highlights the areas of convergence between these approaches. For example, several studies are situated at the intersection of culture/heritage and memory/identity, analyzing traditional cuisine as part of a symbolic heritage laden with collective meanings. Others are located between culture and tourism, proposing models of heritage valorization within tourist circuits. However, few studies integrate the three approaches in a balanced way, suggesting an opportunity for future studies that address gastronomy as a complex phenomenon, where symbolic values, tourism development strategies, and identity-building dynamics intersect.

Strategies for cultural appreciation of heritage cuisine in Ecuador

In the Ecuadorian context, heritage cuisine has begun to be recognized as an everyday cultural practice and a strategic resource for territorial development, local identity, and sustainable tourism. The identified cultural enhancement strategies include the organization of gastronomic fairs, the training of local chefs, the incorporation of traditional cuisine into tourist routes, the promotion of certifications of origin, and the development of heritage inventories that document ancestral culinary knowledge and techniques.

These actions are not developed in isolation, but rather through the coordination of multiple social and institutional actors, as summarized in Figure 3. It shows that gastronomic tourism emerges from the interaction

of four major sectors: the government, local communities, the tourism industry, and culinary businesses. Each contributes specific dimensions: the government fosters incentives, regulates practices, and promotes sustainability policies; communities offer culinary innovation and participate in training processes; the tourism sector is responsible for promotion and market engagement; businesses develop products and establish collaborative networks.



Figure 3. Key players in gastronomic tourism and their complementary functions.

Food fairs, for example, are spaces where producers, chefs, tourism promoters, and public officials converge to showcase local products and recipes, strengthening community ties and boosting the rural economy. These events also allow for the reevaluation of traditional culinary techniques through live demonstrations, workshops, and competitions (Rodas et al., 2024).

Similarly, training local chefs has been a relevant strategy in regions such as Azuay and Chimborazo, where non-governmental organizations and universities work with rural youth and women to preserve traditional recipes and adapt them to the new demands of experiential tourism. These trainings strengthen economic autonomy and foster generational renewal in culinary knowledge (Torres-Oñate et al., 2019).

Another key focus has been the inclusion of culinary experiences on tourist routes. In cities like Ambato and Latacunga, heritage dishes—such as fritada, llapingachos, and Pinllo bread—are integrated into tours that combine market visits, cooking workshops, and historical narratives. This strategy enhances local identity and improves visitor satisfaction, contributing to an authentic and distinctive destination image.

Promoting certifications of origin and quality (for example, for fine aroma cacao or Loja coffee) also strengthens the connection between product and territory. With the support of public and private institutions, it has begun to be used as a strategy to position Ecuadorian cuisine internationally.

Creating heritage inventories contributes to documenting and safeguarding the richness of Ecuadorian cuisine. These processes, generally led by local governments in partnership with communities and universities, allow for recording recipes, agricultural practices, utensils, festivals, and knowledge linked to traditional food.

Strategies for cultural valorization of heritage cuisine in Ecuador reflect collaborative governance where different actors—governments, communities, chefs, NGOs, universities, and the private sector—play complementary roles (Figure 3). This multisectoral coordination is essential to ensuring gastronomic initiatives' sustainability, authenticity, and cultural relevance, allowing traditional cuisine to be preserved and projected as a pillar of inclusive and resilient development.

Research gaps and future opportunities

The systematic review highlights several gaps in the study of heritage gastronomy in Ecuador and its connection with tourism. One of the most notable gaps is the limited research on the Amazonian regions, despite being home to a wide variety of indigenous culinary practices that constitute a unique biocultural heritage. The invisibility of these territories limits a comprehensive understanding of Ecuadorian food heritage and reduces the possibilities for intercultural and sustainable tourism development.

Similarly, a systematic absence of studies focused on Afro-descendant populations is detected, particularly in the province of Esmeraldas and other coastal regions. This omission restricts the recognition of Afro-Ecuadorian culinary knowledge as expressions of cultural resistance and potential differentiated tourism resources, which could contribute to both the diversity of the offering and epistemic justice. Another gap is the lack of longitudinal studies, that is, research that analyzes the evolution, impacts, and sustainability of heritage gastronomy initiatives over time. Most of the works reviewed are specific or cross-sectional case studies, which prevents the assessment of long-term processes and their effects on the communities involved.

There is also a lack of public policy analysis that directly addresses heritage gastronomy as a strategic pillar of territorial, cultural, and tourism development. This weakness limits the ability to coordinate efforts from the public sector and restricts the design of regulatory instruments or effective programs that strengthen this dimension of cultural heritage.

Likewise, a lack of a gender approach is evident. Although women play a central role in many territories as bearers, reproducers, and creators of traditional culinary knowledge, their voice remains marginal in research. Their employment status, participation in decision-making spaces, or the reproduction of inequalities within gastronomic tourism are rarely addressed.

A cross-cutting aspect across all these gaps is the limited inclusion of the voices of cultural bearers. Many studies are designed from an external, academic perspective, without integrating participatory methodologies that give prominence to local actors, traditional cooks, farmers, scholars, and community custodians of food heritage. This methodological exclusion weakens the authenticity of the knowledge generated and hinders its social appropriation.

In response to these gaps, a future research agenda is proposed, structured into five strategic categories illustrated in Figure 4. This agenda seeks to guide more inclusive, critical, and contextualized studies, promoting a comprehensive approach to the gastronomy-tourism dyad. The first category is Territories and Sociocultural Diversity, which emphasizes the need to incorporate underrepresented territorialities and populations. Participatory ethnographies of indigenous culinary practices in the Amazon, studies of native ingredients in tourism offerings, and documentation of Afro-descendant knowledge in areas such as Esmeraldas are proposed. The project also proposes mapping food circuits in rural regions of the South and the northern border, which have traditionally been marginalized in heritage policies.

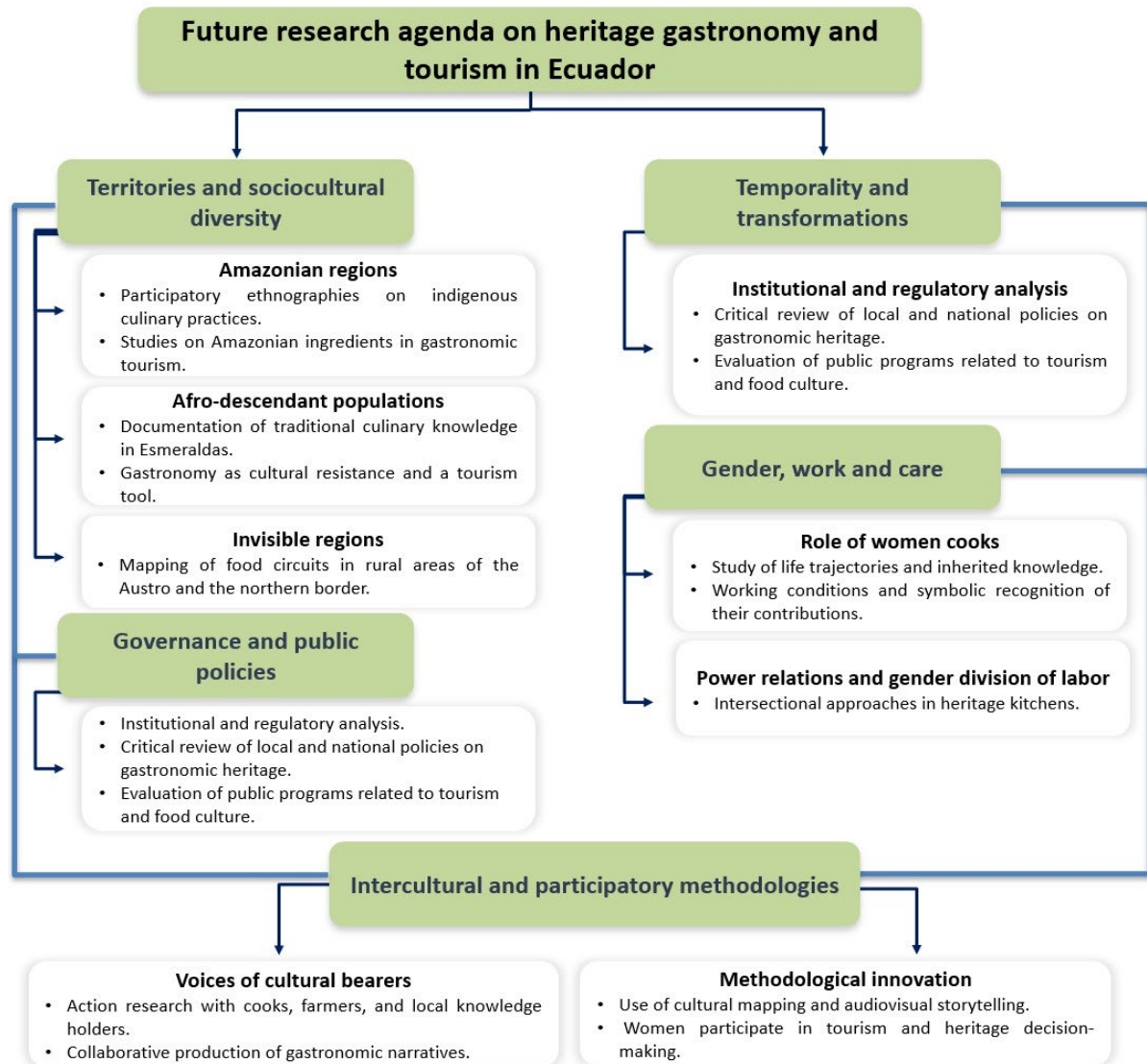


Figure 4. Future research agenda on heritage gastronomy and tourism in Ecuador.

Second, the Temporality and Transformations axis is included, promoting longitudinal studies evaluating heritage gastronomic initiatives' sustainable impact over time. It also proposes investigating intergenerational transformations in the transmission of culinary knowledge and how these influence the adaptation of traditional recipes to new tourism contexts. The third axis is Governance and Public Policies, which focuses on critically reviewing national and local policies related to gastronomy and tourism. The proposal is to evaluate existing public programs and design participatory management models that actively integrate cultural leaders into developing local governance policies and strategies.

The fourth category, Gender, Work, and Care, seeks to highlight the role of women cooks as the primary transmitters of culinary knowledge. It aims to study their life trajectories, working conditions, and forms of symbolic recognition. It also suggests addressing power relations and the sexual division of labor in heritage cuisines, incorporating intersectional approaches. This agenda responds to the identified gaps and proposes research avenues to enhance traditional cuisine as a tool for memory, sustainability, social justice, and the construction of more ethical tourism rooted in the territories.

CONCLUSIONS

Heritage cuisine in Ecuador has become a fundamental component of intangible cultural heritage and a strategy to boost sustainable tourism and strengthen local identities. The analyzed studies reveal a diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches that all recognize traditional gastronomy's symbolic, social, and economic value. The valorization strategies identified—such as integrating ancestral recipes into tourist routes, organizing gastronomic fairs, and developing heritage inventories—have contributed to raising awareness of local knowledge and generating opportunities for territorial development.

However, the analysis also reveals limitations: there is a weak connection between the cultural, tourism, and agricultural sectors; the participation of women and Afro-descendant and indigenous communities is still

marginal in the literature; and there is a lack of longitudinal studies that evaluate the sustained impacts of gastronomic initiatives. These gaps indicate the need for more integrated public policies and interdisciplinary research approaches incorporating local voices, gender perspectives, and environmental and cultural sustainability criteria. In short, heritage cuisine has the potential to consolidate itself as a connecting axis of memory, identity, and development, provided that collaborative governance and a respectful and critical cultural appreciation of Ecuador's multiple territorialities are promoted.

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