

Preserving Cultural Heritage through Food: Youths' Perception of Negeri Sembilan Traditional Cuisine in Malaysia

Munira Saaidin, Zarith Nadiah Zulkefli

Faculty of Business, UNITAR International University, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia F&B Nutrition
Sdn. Bhd, Malaysia

Corresponding Authors Email: munira@unitar.my

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Abstract

This study is to understand the impact of food preferences among youths towards traditional food of Negeri Sembilan. There are three variables that being focused on this study: values, food preparation and ingredients. All the variables contributed to the relationship of food preference with cultural continuity among young generations. The data were collected from Klang Valley and Seremban, Negeri Sembilan area. There were 200 questionnaires distributed to the respondents, all were accepted and used to analyze the result. The questionnaire has been distributed personally to the respondent with four sections: Section A,B,C and D. For the analysis, researchers used the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). From the findings, it indicates that there are positive relationships between the food preferences and traditional food of Negeri Sembilan. Furthermore, the results which have been analyzed provide a better understanding and knowledge of the preferences for traditional food in Negeri Sembilan either during festival or normal days.

Keywords: Traditional Food Consumption, Food Preference Behavior, Cultural Heritage Cuisine, Negeri Sembilan Traditional Dishes, Ingredients and Culinary Practices

Introduction

Malaysia is known as a multi-race' country in the eyes of the globe. Cultural values and food preparation influence the preservation of traditional cuisine in modern contexts. Traditional food plays an essential role in preserving cultural memory and identity. When such dishes are no longer prepared or shared within families, ethnic communities, or during religious celebrations, the connection to cultural roots gradually weakens. Over time, the values, stories, and practices tied to these foods risk fading as modernization changes everyday life. Preserving traditional food practices, therefore, is not only about keeping recipes alive but also about maintaining the cultural continuity that binds one generation to

the next. The motivation behind this study arises from the growing concern over the declining interest in traditional food among Malaysian youth.

Negeri Sembilan



Figure 1: Map of Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. (N. Story, 2015, FreeSVG)

There are seven districts in Negeri Sembilan namely Seremban, Port Dickson, Jelebu, Kuala Pilah, Rembau, Tampin and Jempol. Negeri Sembilan, situated on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula, is characterized by a substantial population of Minangkabau descent.(Gallop, 2013). The influence of Minangkabau culture is tranquil evident in both the traditional architecture and the Malay language spoken in the region. Negeri Sembilan cuisines on the other hand have great influenced from the Minangkabau of West Sumatera.

Food preferences are socially collected concept in which both users and producer define what is “good to eat. Moreover, food preferences describe how individuals select from the range of foods available, guided by biological needs as well as cultural and personal influences. It also affects with the insight including taste, value, purity, ease or difficulty of preparation and the accessibility of other preparation tools. Among Malaysia’s younger generation, traditional Malay dishes are gradually losing their place to modern and commercial food options. This change appears to stem from ongoing social transformation and the pervasive reach of information technology, which continue to reshape dietary behavior and cultural food practices. In every culture and religion around the world, food holds a vital place in celebrations and communal gatherings. Food will unite and support people, which would maintain a common identity among a group of people.

It is reminded of memories that maybe related to the family, friends or childhood memories. Citizens in the country would have many memories of a food that brings them back to their childhood. Memories of food can range from the simple pleasure of a childhood candy to the cherished experience of learning to cook a Negeri Sembilan traditional meal with one's grandmother. Not just using the sight, or just the taste, but all the senses and that offers the potential to layer the richness of a food memory. The nostalgic moment will keep the memories especially when you are preparing or eating this food.

Traditional Food

Traditional food refers to the use of food ingredients, food preparation methods and the taste of the food which has been passed on from one generation to the next. The traditional foods enacted a major part in traditions of different cultures and regions for thousands of years including foods that have been inspired locally and regionally for a long time. Distinctions between "cultural food" and "food culture" illustrate the deep integration of cuisine within identity and daily life. (Jayasinghe et al., 2025). Traditional cooking methods carry cultural narratives and collective memories of a nation or locality. Traditional food is a food with a specific feature or features which distinguish it clearly from other similar products of the same category in terms of the use of "traditional ingredients" (raw material of primary products) or "traditional composition" or "traditional type of production and /or processing method (Hashim, et al., 2024).

The most popular dish among the traditional food in Negeri Sembilan, is 'masak lemak cili padi'. It literally means cook with coconut milk with green chilies. It is a signature dish from Minang Cuisine. A wonderful food eaten with warm rice for lunch and dinner. Featuring coconut milk as its core ingredient, the dish gains its bold character from the fiery *cili padi* and the smoky aroma of roasted meat, creating a uniquely flavorful experience for the palate. Occasionally, the dish can be cooked with smoke meat (daging salai), smoke catfish (ikan keli salai) and smoke duck (itik salai) together with some pineapple to give flavors to the food. Traditional cuisine encompasses foods and drinks prepared by using ingredients and methods that have been conceded through generations within a particular community or region. This is supported by Suleiman et al., (2023), traditional foods are seen as a lifestyle and a symbol of historical and cultural identity. According to Mohamad et al., 2022, to ensure the conservation and preservation of legacy cuisine in the future, it is key that this food be maintained and practiced from generation to generation.

Food Preference

The absence of experience causes young people today have no desire to attempt and approach traditional food in Malaysia; this is because young people prefer contemporary food. (Hashim, et al., 2024). Each person's exposure to food is shaped by distinct experiences, leading to variations in what we enjoy and prefer to eat. The experiences can be defined as psychological factors affecting food preferences among young generations. Saaidin, Azhari, and Manaois (2024) found that cultural comparisons emerged as a significant theme in understanding food acceptance.

Values

A value is a belief, a mission or a philosophy that is meaningful. Abd Latif et al. (2020), the reason being, Malaysia has the best breath-taking landscapes, vivacious cities, appealing

history, social-culture, art heritage, nice food, and few of the most stunning beaches in the world. Whether we are consciously aware of them or not. Every individual has a core set of personal values. The transmission of that heritage of cooking is strongly linked to family values, and they are attached to their culinary heritage and consider it an important part of their culture. Izhar et al., (2023) explained, the Malay custom of eating with hands adds cultural depth to the dining experience.

History plays an important role in giving a symbolic meaning to individual or community history and cultural background and further redefining their identity in the multi-ethnic community in one country (Ramli et al., 2024). Shariff S. M. et al. (2021) found that the pre-preparation processes, cooking processes, cooking skills, and eating modesty are the gastronomy knowledge and practices transferred through the generation. The transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next generation are crucial in transmitting practices, beliefs, or ways of thinking that endure (Hashim, et al., 2024).

Food Preparation

According to Malay customs, men are the heads of the household and family, while women are housewives who focus on household duties including cooking, cleaning, and looking after children. (Izhar et al., 2023). The Malaysian region which is famous with various types of food such laksa johor, masak lemak itik salai, nasi kerabu, nasi dagang, asam pedas and many more which all the dishes prepared based on the local ingredients, herbs and spices. The preparation of the dishes varied with one another, and this makes the preparation unique and delicate in taste.

Ingredients

Izhar et al., 2023 mentioned the secret of the uniqueness of Malay cuisine lies in the use of herbs and spices combined with traditional equipment and special cooking methods. Fresh herbs such as daun kemangi (a type of basil), daun kesum (polygonum or laksa leaf), nutmeg and turmeric are often used. Malay cooking is known for its vibrant use of both local and regional spices. Traditional seasonings such as cumin and coriander are often blended with influences from Indian and Chinese cuisine, including pepper, cardamom, star anise, and fenugreek. Rather than relying solely on dried spices, Malay dishes commonly feature fresh ingredients like turmeric, galangal, chili paste, onions, and garlic to create rich layers of flavor. These ingredients are typically ground or pounded into a fine paste, then gently sautéed in oil to release their aroma. The addition of creamy coconut milk further enhances the texture and depth of taste, giving Malay food its distinctive character.

The culinary of Negeri Sembilan which has a strong similarity with the land of the Minangkabau in West Sumatra richly spiced dishes cooked in plenty of thick coconut milk. The authenticity of the food is interrelated with the geographical name of a designated product of origin in a region. It is explained by the fact that the product of the designated region presents a few characteristics of quality and originality that result from geographical influences and human factors (Krajnc et al., 2021).

Methodology

The purpose of this research is to study the food preferences on traditional food in Negeri Sembilan. For this research the type of research used is quantitative research.

Quantitative research methods emphasize objective measurement and the statically, mathematical or numerical analysis of data collected through questionnaire. As for this research, survey method was used where the questionnaire was distributed to 200 respondents. The questionnaires regarding the preferences on traditional food in Negeri Sembilan will be analyzed and explained in data analysis procedure by using Likert scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Data Collection Process

There are two types of data for this research which are primary data and secondary data. The aim of obtaining and gathering these two types of data is to help the researcher collect the data, it helps the researcher to have a better understanding of the study. This research population comprised of people who knows about traditional food of Negeri Sembilan. The research sample or the respondents were randomly selected but before that the researcher will ask whether they know about Negeri Sembilan traditional food or not. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed, and all the 200 questionnaires were accepted. The instrument that has been used for this research is self-administered questionnaires. A survey instrument in the form of a close-ended questionnaire was developed for the data collection process (Malik & Munap, 2023). The researcher distributed it personally to anyone who knows about traditional food of Negeri Sembilan. The aim of having this questionnaire is to find out about food preferences on traditional food in Negeri Sembilan during festival.

This questionnaire consists, (1) Section A consists of questions regarding the respondent's profile such as (Gender, Age, Race, State of Origin, Occupation and the last time ate Negeri Sembilan traditional food) (2) Section B consists of questions regarding the independent variable (Food Preferences). Likert - scale has been used by the researcher in Section B, (3) Section C comprises questions for dependent variable (Traditional food of Negeri Sembilan), and (4) Section D is Open-ended questions which provide the respondent to give their knowledge and opinion on the food preferences traditional food in Negeri Sembilan. In this study, data analysis procedures were analyzed through questionnaires and researcher process the data collected is Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS).

Analysis and Findings

According to table 1, it shows that female respondents has exceeded the male respondent by 134 (% = 66.7), where male respondents are 67 (% = 33.3). Based on researcher observation, most of the respondents who know about Negeri Sembilan traditional food come from female group. In addition, their numbers are increasing when most of the male approached are from Negeri Sembilan. This could be the reason for high numbers of female respondent who is answered the questionnaire.

In the age segment, there are four categories provided in the questionnaire. The result shows that the age range between 18 to 24 years old turned out to be the highest proportion (n = 110, % = 54.7), followed by a range of ages between 25 to 34 years old (n = 43, % = 21.4). Other than that, the age range between 35 to 44 years old (n = 36, % 17.9) and lastly the age range more than 45 years old (n = 12, % = 6). Based on this result, it can be assumed that respondents of this age may consist of workers of nearby companies and students of a few academic institutions there.

In terms of state of origin, the result show that Selangor turned out to be the highest proportion ($n = 82$, $\% = 40.8$), followed by Johor ($n = 21$, $\% = 10.5$), Sabah ($n = 16$, $\% = 8$), Pahang ($n = 12$, $\% = 6$) and Negeri Sembilan and Kedah got the same numbers ($n = 11$, $\% = 5.5$). These are the five highest in state of origin. Based on the result, it can be assumed that the respondents from Selangor mostly know about Negeri Sembilan traditional food may be because of their family and their wife or husband.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Values (N=200)

Item	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Verbal Description
I prefer Negeri Sembilan traditional food because of my old memories	200	3.89	0.907	Agree
My family and I always chose traditional food to be enjoyed together.	200	3.77	0.987	Agree
I appreciate Negeri Sembilan traditional food more because of their own unique taste.	200	3.64	0.868	Slightly Agree
I feel traditional food is more comforting and tasteful than modern food.	200	3.80	0.940	Agree
Negeri Sembilan have a lot of traditional food such as Masak Lemak Cili Padi, Apam Johol, Rendang Minang and Kuih Sopang.	200	4.19	0.809	Totally Agree

According to Table 1, the highest mean for the values is number 5 with mean 4.19 which have totally agreed for verbal description. The lowest mean is 3.64 with verbal description, slightly agree which belong to number 3. Overall mean and level of agreement for this dependent is agreed.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Food Preparation (N=200)

Item	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Verbal Description
The traditional way to prepare Negeri Sembilan traditional food by using the claypot.	200	3.39	0.895	Neutral
All the cooking ingredients need to be pounded until finely crushed.	200	3.71	0.767	Agree
The preparation and the cook of traditional food is time consuming.	200	3.59	0.880	Neutral
Smoke grill method is use to get the aroma on meat, fish and duck.	200	4.01	0.894	Agree
The common method used in Negeri Sembilan traditional food is smoke grill method.	200	3.86	0.880	Agree

To be more delicious and fragrant smell of the apam jhol, need to use daun rambai.	200	3.52	0.879	Neutral
The main base of the traditional food is coconut milk and bird's eye chilli.	200	3.98	0.891	Agree

According to the Table 2, the highest mean for the food preparation is number 4 with mean 4.01 which have agreed for verbal description. The lowest mean 3.39 with verbal description, neutral which belongs to number 1. Overall mean and level of agreement for this dependent is agreed.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of Ingredients(N=200)

Item	n	Mean	Standard Deviation	Verbal Descriptive
Mostly, the traditional fod are made from fresh ingredients (coconut milk, fresh turmeric and cilipadi).	200	4.13	0.798	Agree
The signature traditional food in Negeri Sembilan mostly is spicy.	200	4.29	0.844	Totally Agree
To make traditional food determine by the freshness and the quality.	200	3.98	0.946	Totally Agree
The Negeri Sembilan traditional dish are unique in the sense of color, taste and presentation.	200	3.90	0.967	Agree

According to Table 3, the highest mean for accommodation comfort is number 2 with mean 4.29 which have totally agreed for verbal description. The lowest mean is 3.90 with verbal description, agree which belong to number 4. Overall mean and level of agreement for this dependent is between agree and totally agree.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations of Traditional Food(N=200)

Item	n	Mean	Standard Deviation	Verbal Descriptive
Negeri Sembilan traditional foods represent the background of Minang culture and heritage.	200	4.23	0.755	Agree
There are always particular sentimental memories when consume traditional food during festival.	200	3.92	0.873	Agree
In Malaysia, there is similar Negeri Sembilan traditional food elsewhere, but people use different ingredients and technique in their cooking.	200	3.82	1.060	Totally Agree
Traditional food are regularly worked together for any festival for example on wedding day.	200	3.90	1.026	Agree

According to Table 4, the highest mean for the experience is number 1 with mean 4.23 which has agreed for verbal description. The lowest mean is 3.82 with verbal description, totally agree which belong to number 3. Overall mean and level of agreement for this dependent is agreed.

Discussion and Conclusion

Values

Based on this research, there are still a handful of people who do not know about traditional foods of Negeri Sembilan, especially young people, so the traditional foods need to be served more often, especially when there is a festival so that can be maintained and more appreciated. We should embrace our heritage through our culture's food, but we should also become more informed about other cultures by trying their foods. It's important to remember that each dish has a special place in the culture to which it belongs and is special to those who prepare it. Food is a portal into culture, and it should be treated as such.

Food Preparation

With advanced equipment, traditional tools such as grindstone, coconut grater and mortar and pestle are no longer applicable. So, those who do not recognize traditional equipment may be able to visit the museum to recognize or just google it. There is a difference in quality and texture when using traditional equipment or modern equipment. Because many tropical ingredients spoil quickly after ripening, early cooks developed creative methods to make them last longer. They learned to dry, ferment, salt, smoke, or even grind them into flour and transform them into pickles, ensuring that seasonal produce could be enjoyed throughout the year.

Ingredients

Malay traditional food is recognized mainly by its geographical location, according to the states. The west coast and the northern states are well known for their hot, spicy food. While the central part is rich in gravy and the southern states are renowned with thick and spicy sauces. Region that is more associated with sweet, local herbs and spices but rich fare with glutinous rice is the east coast. However, the true Malay traditional food, in my opinion, should be prepared using only local ingredients. The spices and herbs are grounded manually, the meals are cooked over ancient-styled oven or stove, stirred with traditional utensils, packed or served in tropical edible leaves, eaten using the hand, following Malay etiquette and table manners.

As the conclusion, on a larger scale, food is an essential part of culture. Traditional gastronomy is passed down from one generation to the next. It also operates as an expression of cultural identity. When people migrate, they often carry their culinary traditions with them, turning food into a living link to their homeland. Preparing familiar dishes becomes a way to stay connected to their roots and to share their culture with others in new environments. Over time, these recipes evolve as migrants adapt to local ingredients, blending old flavors with new influences while preserving the spirit of their traditional cuisine. Traditional foods that have been eaten for centuries and even millennium are the foods that our great grandmother and grandfather would have eaten. The cuisines are simple, naturally grown or raised, nutrient dense, thoughtfully prepared.

Theoretical and Contextual Contribution

Theoretically, the results highlight how values, preparation practices, and ingredients serve as mechanisms for sustaining traditional knowledge and reinforcing cultural belonging among younger generations. By linking food preference behavior to cultural identity, the study supports the idea that food is not only a nutritional need but also a carrier of meaning and collective memory.

Contextually, this study enriches the current understanding of Negeri Sembilan's traditional cuisine, which is deeply rooted in Minangkabau cultural heritage. Furthermore, the insights derived can guide policymakers, tourism boards, and cultural organizations in designing programs that promote local food as both a cultural asset and a tool for identity preservation.

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