



# PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM FUTURES IN TIMOR-LESTE

by creating synergies between  
food, place & people



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# **Promoting Sustainable Tourism Futures in Timor-Leste by Creating Synergies between Food, Place, and People<sup>1</sup>**

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# Abstract

Following 400 years of Portuguese colonial administration and 24 years of Indonesian occupation, post-conflict Timor-Leste's government has been underpinned by its commitment to reconciliation and democracy. Sustainable development approaches have catalysed the country's transition from civil unrest to state-stability, but much work remains if lasting economic benefits are to be felt by the country's majority rural population. While rhetoric indicates that Timor-Leste is committed to the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals and achieving economic diversification, the continued dependence on oil presents an imminent economic and societal challenge. Tourism in Timor-Leste is acknowledged as being one of the nation's most important non-oil sectors, and its growth requires the availability of quality tourism products and experiences. A key activity that can create synergies between culture, history and nature is an exploration of food, place and people towards eliciting the "story" of the food of Timor-Leste. This qualitative research utilised interviews and focus groups to explore how food stories and experiential culinary tourism can allow for the development of a positive narrative of resilience in contemporary Timor-Leste. The empirical findings suggest that food providers and restaurants owners share a responsibility in decisions about what food and food stories become tourism offerings in Timor-Leste.

## **KEYWORDS:**

Timor-Leste; tourism development; food stories; sustainable tourism; community tourism



# Introduction

Situated approximately an hour's flying time north of Darwin, Australia, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, is one of the world's youngest nations. Timor-Leste is geographically a small country comprising approximately 15,000 square kilometres of the eastern half of Timor Island, a small number of offshore islands and an exclave situated on the northern coast of West Timor. Timor-Leste is home to just over a million people and has one of the youngest populations in the Asia-Pacific region (median age 17.4 years; Government of Timor-Leste, 2019). After centuries of colonial administration and decades of hostile occupation, Timor-Leste became a sovereign, independent nation in 2002. However, despite its rich natural resources and significant economic, health and education gains since 2002, Timor-Leste remains classified by the United Nations as a 'least developed country' and continues to face the myriad of challenges associated with this.

In 2014, nearly 42 percent of the citizens of Timor-Leste were living in poverty (World Bank, 2020). In 2018, Timor-Leste ranked 131 out of 189 countries and territories on the Human Development Index, which assesses long-term progress on life expectancy, education and per capita income. There are also numerous urgent gender concerns, including pervasive gender-based violence, high maternal mortality, and significant gender gaps in labour market and local governance participation (United Nations Development Program, 2019). When employment fell to 89.6 percent in 2010 (from 91.5% in 2004), women and rural areas were

most affected, with the employment rate for women falling 5.3 percent compared to 0.2 percent for men (Ministry of Finance, 2010). Gender inequality is a significant obstacle to socio-economic development and needs to be addressed as an imperative for Timor-Leste's sustainable development.

Innes (2017), in his staple thesis, suggests that the reliance on the export of natural resources to more advanced economies has a significant impact not just on the economy of the exporting country, but also on its social and political systems. This dependency is a significant risk for the economy of Timor-Leste, which is heavily oil-dependent, a level of dependency only surpassed by South Sudan. It is estimated that oil revenues provide 90 percent of the government's income, which places Timor-Leste at significant fiscal risk if the economy does not diversify (Domínguez, 2014; Palatino, 2014). Timor-Leste's oil and gas are rapidly dwindling resources and the Petroleum Fund of Timor-Leste, which provides income for the nation, may potentially run out in the next decade due to the Government of Timor-Leste's (GOTL) consistent and unsustainable withdrawals. Economic diversification has therefore become an imperative concern for GOTL, as articulated in its Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030, which aims to leverage the strong 10 percent annual growth in the non-oil economy since 2007 by building a modern and diversified economy.

Coffee and candlenut are the two most important agricultural cash crops in Timor-Leste. In 2019, approximately US \$18.3 million in coffee and \$450,000 of candlenut were exported from Timor-Leste (National Directorate of Statistics, 2019). Although significant agricultural exports, they pale into insignificance compared to those of oil (coffee comprises approximately 1% of the country's annual budget; Marx, 2016).

Tourism is Timor-Leste's third largest economic sector. It has been identified as a development priority by the government as well as by various international non-governmental organisations (Tolkach & King, 2015). Tourism is viewed as an opportunity that has the potential to stimulate the country's emerging private sector as well as help Timor-Leste continue to make progress towards the sustainable development

goals (SDGs; Courvisanos, 2018). In response to these opportunities, the government of Timor-Leste has taken the approach of pursuing a model of sustainable and socially responsible tourism (Cabasset-Semedo, 2009) in which the country's natural environment and historical and cultural assets are promoted within the context of Timor-Leste being a nascent tourism destination. In essence, this early stage of tourism development allows Timor-Leste "to build 'from scratch' an innovative and sustainable tourism sector that capitalises on the advantages of peripherality" (Weaver, 2018, p. 118). This is reflected in Timor-Leste's tourism brand, *Explore the Undiscovered*, which is centred around two key themes: (1) Timor-Leste's unique cultural identity; and (2) its position as a relatively unexplored destination (Government of Timor-Leste, 2017b).

These themes were built on tourism products and experiences linked to Timor-Leste's traditional culture, history, people, and nature. Although Timor-Leste's history is well documented, there is an overwhelming lack of information with regard to what these cultural and natural assets consist of and how they can be consumed and experienced from a tourism perspective. This includes questions such as, "What comprises Timorese food?", "Where can traditional, high-quality Timorese food and coffee be consumed?", "What is Timorese culture?", and "How can travellers access and experience Timorese culture?" A key activity that can potentially create synergies between culture, history and nature is an exploration of place and people through their "food stories" (Berno, Dodd, & Wisansing, 2019; Berno & Fountain, 2020). Given Timor-Leste's long history of colonial administration and hostile occupations, food stories and experiential culinary tourism has the potential to become a conduit for the development of a positive narrative of resilience in contemporary Timor-Leste, which, in turn, can help facilitate the creation of shared futures in an otherwise divided post-conflict society. Tourism in Timor-Leste is seen as a possible catalyst for economic growth. By connecting culture, history and identity under an umbrella of "culinary tourism", food and food tourism can unite a population heavily reliant on agriculture creating new economic opportunities for growth and prosperity.



# Timor-Leste: the “impossible history & possible futures”<sup>2</sup>

As suggested by Appadurai (1996), place is produced through the intersection of social relations, expressions of identity and the practice of culture. Timor-Leste is a complex place with a complex history through which the nation's culture and identity has evolved via Portuguese colonisation, World War II, the Indonesian invasion and occupation, and the United Nations mission up until the current transitional era of independence (Currie, 2018). As a result, the collective memory (and identity) of the people of Timor-Leste incorporates a history of continuous foreign occupations with devastating consequences that continue to echo in the lived experiences of the people of the nation (Gomes, 2013). “Timor-Leste's story, both sad and triumphant, is of a long, painful struggle for political freedom, independence and unity” (Dayley, 2019, p. 206).

Commencing with the arrival of Portuguese friars in the sixteenth century, Timor-Leste was subjected to various forms of foreign presence until the end of twentieth century. By the late 1700s, Timor-Leste was ostensibly under Portuguese control, a colonial legacy that would last until the second World War when Dutch and Australian troops established East Timor as an Allied military staging ground. This was not to last long as the Allies were defeated in a battle on the island by the Japanese in 1942, thus heralding a brutal occupation by Japanese forces during which tens of thousands of Timorese were killed. At the end of

<sup>2</sup> Szanto, 2017, p. 3.





World War II, Timorese leaders led an unsuccessful attempt for independence and the Portuguese returned for what has been described as “three more decades of unwanted colonial rule” (Dayley, 2019, p. 207).

As a result of civil political upheaval in Portugal, East Timor nearly gained independence in 1975. This independence did not take hold however, and in early December of that year, fearing the emergence of a “Cuba of the South Pacific” (Smith, 2004, p. 146), Indonesia launched military attacks from West Timor. This eventuated in a full-scale invasion at the end of 1975 in which Indonesia employed vicious tactics and mass atrocities in their efforts to force annexation (Dayley, 2019). During the invasion, close to 40,000 people fled to West Timor and 4,000 fled to Portugal or Australia (Khamis, 2015). From the original population of 650,000, it is estimated that 100,000 Timorese lost their lives during the invasion, making it one of the worst contemporary mass atrocities in terms of lives lost per capita (Dayley, 2019). The ongoing Indonesian occupation with its ensuing violence and years of starvation and poverty-driven illness resulted in nearly one-quarter of East Timor’s pre-1975 population dying during their 25-year rule of the nation (Timor-Leste Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (2013) cited in Dayley, 2019).

In 1999, the people of East Timor voted in a referendum choosing between independence or limited autonomy within Indonesia. Seventy-eight percent chose independence, resulting in Indonesian forces retaliating by destroying close to 80 percent of buildings in Timor-Leste, effectively disrupting governance, commerce and agriculture for months (Hill, 2001). It was not until late 1999 with the international condemnation of Indonesia’s actions and the arrival of an 8,000 strong Australian-led multinational military force that Indonesia finally withdrew (Khamis, 2015). Finally, in 2002, after enduring centuries of colonial rule and decades of violent occupations, Timor-Leste became a sovereign, independent nation. This, however, was not the end of foreign presence in the country. Timor-Leste was still to endure years of ‘occupation’ by United Nations security forces, a significant Australian-led peacekeeping contingency and

dozens of international aid organisations (Dayley, 2019).

The history of Timor-Leste of course pre-dates occupation and conflict, and this history also influences contemporary culture. Traditional knowledge and understanding also has an important influence, for example *Lulik*, which is a concept that is integral to Timorese culture and continues to be widely used and influences daily life for the Timorese. Although *lukik* literally translates as “forbidden”, “holy” or “sacred”, the concept has much deeper and wider applications. *Lulik* is a set of fundamental, philosophical orientations that determines how Timorese should behave in social and environmental interactions. *Lulik* is a philosophy that ensures peace and tranquillity for Timorese society as a whole and it continues to be a core value in contemporary Timorese society (Bovensiepen, 2014; McWilliam et al., 2014; Trindale, 2011) for intentions and actions across all realms of Timorese life (McWilliam, 2014). During the Indonesian occupation, it is said that Timorese protected themselves from the Indonesian military and pro-Indonesia militias by ‘opening the land’ and releasing *lukik* powers in the form of an army of land spirits (Bovensiepen, 2011) demonstrating that when managed and respected, *lukik* is a powerful resource in Timorese culture (Bovensiepen, 2014). As a result of this complex history, Timor-Leste’s culture has evolved to become a “unique personality” (Currie, 2018, p. 451). One characteristic of this is a strong history of resilience, with some researchers suggesting that this resilience is seen as a defining aspect of Timorese identity (Currie, 2018; Pannell, 2011).



# The food of Timor-Leste

In a fashion similar to that of the socio-political history of Timor-Leste, the agricultural origins of food in the nation has also evolved over time, reflecting various exogenous influences that have now become embedded in Timorese food culture. Up until the time of European contact, the main sources of food in the Timorese diet were from hunting, fishing and gathering. As a result of European contact in the sixteenth century, watermelon, papaya, chilli, potato, tomato, eggplant, cabbage, sweet potato and peanuts were introduced (Erskine et al., 2016). However, it was three crops originating in the Americas and brought by the Europeans that completely changed the agriculture and foodscape of Timor. These crops were maize, pumpkin/squash and cassava, which, along with mung beans, now comprise the staples of the Timorese diet (Fox, 2003).

Maize is by far the most important food crop for the Timorese. It is believed that maize was introduced by the Portuguese. Once introduced, it quickly spread throughout the island to become the mainstay of the Timorese diet. Similarly, pumpkin/squash quickly grew to become an invaluable food source both during times of abundance and in times of scarcity. Cassava on the other hand was hardly grown in Timor until the 20th century, and in fact, there was not even a Timorese word for the plant. It was with the Japanese occupation during World War II that cassava production increased, as the Japanese forced the Timorese to plant it. Once introduced, however, cassava quickly became one of the island's most important food crops, particularly during periods of drought (Fox, 2003).



Rice is believed to be one of the earliest food crops cultivated in Timor-Leste. It wasn't until the latter half of the 20th century, however, that rice became the focus for further Timorese agricultural transformation. This came as a result of the Portuguese introducing several varieties of high-yielding rice that they had developed. These new developments in rice agriculture were still in the initial stages when the Indonesians moved in to occupy East Timor in the 1970s. At that time, Indonesia was involved in a massive national programme of rice intensification, and these rice development policies were extended to include East Timor (Fox, 2003). Rice is now a staple of the Timorese diet, though most rice currently consumed in Timor-Leste comprises subsidised imports from Vietnam and Cambodia (Desmond, 2015).

Coffee was another introduced crop, initially brought to East Timor by the Dutch in the mid-eighteenth century. However, it was not until the 1860s that the development of coffee became a priority for the

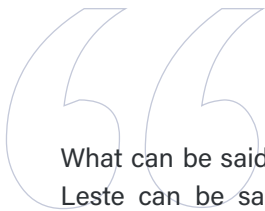
Portuguese (Khamis, 2015). The success of coffee as an export commodity during this time led to a dual economy of "rich crops" (introduced profitable plantation crops like coffee) and "poor crops" (pre-existing subsistence crops; Erskine et al., 2016; Shepherd & Palmer, 2015), which persists to the present day. Although suffering significant setbacks during the Indonesian occupation in particular, coffee now accounts for 80–90 percent of Timor-Leste's non-oil exports. Although comprising a mere 0.2 percent of the global coffee supply, along with the acknowledged quality of its taste, Timor-Leste coffee has one comparative advantage – it is the largest source of single-origin organic coffee in the world (Khamis, 2015).

Subsistence farming continues to be an important source of food for the approximately 70 percent of Timorese who live in rural areas (Liur, 2018), along with foraging for wild foods (Erskine et al., 2015). Foraged foods, in particular, played an important role during the Indonesian occupation. For many of the Timorese resistance fighters who lived for years in the jungle, these foraged "hero foods" contributed to their survival (Szanto, 2017, p. 3). Pannell (2011) suggests that it was this diverse and flexible nature of being able to use traditional food gathering practices that helped facilitate the forest-based resistance to Indonesian forces. Although wild foods are still an important part of the Timorese diet and continue to be consumed as a complement to cultivated foods (Erskine et al., 2015), these once highly regarded "heroic elements" (Pannell, 2011, p. 223) of survival through agricultural diversity are under threat from the nation-building activities of the newly democratic Timor-Leste (Pannell, 2011).

Despite the endurance of local products in Timorese cuisine, contemporary Timor-Leste food reflects its conflict-filled past. Dietler (2007) has suggested that there is an intimate link between foodways and the embodiment of identity, and between commensality and politics. As a result of this, he considers the domain of food an important arena for addressing the struggles of colonisation, appropriation and resistance. In essence, Dietler is suggesting that contemporary foodways and identities are in part the product of colonial encounters and that,

concomitantly, food is a medium for the enactment of colonisation. As Desmond (2015, para. 15) has suggested, “[t]he Timorese have been too busy warding off starvation to develop a sophisticated national cuisine” or as Pannell (2011, p. 230) suggests, “[f]or local people, the entire period of the Indonesian occupation is associated with such events and emotions [violence and terror], mediated by their experience of ‘running into the forest’ and ‘hiding in the mountains’”.

Zajac (2014, paras. 18–19) further reflects on the link between the food of Timor-Leste and its past:



What can be said about the food of Timor Leste can be said of cultural identity in Timor Leste. Contemporary cuisine is a blend of European, Asian and modern Western flavours and recipes. Historical and political influencers have left their mark; a fusion of religious beliefs, gender roles and relations, and ways of celebrating and mourning. Every way you look at it, food can be linked to something else about Timor Leste; its climate, maternal health and how to turn a profit at the market; its infrastructure, trade or relationship with Indonesia.

We argue that in addition to the linkages between food to “something else about Timor Leste” suggested by Zajac (2014), above, another potential link (and source of opportunities) is between food and tourism as a tool for sustainable development and the achievement of the SDGs.



# Sustainable tourism futures in Timor-Leste

As discussed above, tourism in Timor-Leste is viewed as a key development opportunity to address the heavy reliance on oil and gas production as the country's main economic driver. Although Timor-Leste has many attributes that bode favourably for it as a tourism destination, its history of occupation, civil unrest, limited infrastructure and the ensuing negative reputation of being an unsettled and dangerous destination to visit has inhibited any significant tourism development to date (Tolkach, 2017).

Tourism is a natural source of revenue for Timor-Leste due to its biodiverse marine ecosystems, unique flora and fauna, rich and diverse traditional cultures, and unique history of resistance against Portuguese colonisation and Indonesian occupation. Over the course of six years, tourism has increased its contribution to the country's economy from USD \$14.6 million in 2014 (The Asia Foundation, 2014) to USD \$23.2 million in 2019 (The Asia Foundation, 2020a). The tourism sector can diversify the economy by growing markets for local agriculture (especially coffee, a main non-oil export), providing employment, reducing regional economic imbalances, and increasing foreign exchange inflows. However, Timor-Leste's tourism sector is at a pivotal moment where, while some progress has been made, new challenges lie on the horizon. Progress to date has included





the launch of the official Timor-Leste tourism website and tourism brand Explore the Undiscovered; extensive discourse on sustainable and inclusive tourism; creation of industry associations among hoteliers, tour operators and the marine industry; and development and approval of a national tourism policy Growing Tourism to 2030 – Creating a Sense of National Identity (Government of Timor-Leste, 2017c).

Since 2014, The Asia Foundation in partnership with the country's Ministry of Tourism has collected survey data annually in the departure lounge of Dili International Airport. Data from the most recent survey in 2019, found that the largest market of leisure travellers to Timor-Leste was Australia (40%), with secondary and tertiary markets being derived from Indonesia (10%) and the USA (8%). Research suggests that a large percentage of visitors entering the country with Class 1 Tourist Visas are in fact visiting Timor-Leste for business purposes. More than half of the tourists to Timor-Leste are visiting for work, meetings, or business-related activities. The survey outcomes suggest that only 30 percent of

those issued with Class 1 Tourist Visas visited Timor-Leste on holiday (The Asia Foundation, 2020a).

Beyond the natural geographical source markets of Australia and Indonesia, there are several niche tourism markets within which Timor-Leste has a relative competitive advantage. Niche tourism markets are specific segments, usually developed around a well-defined product, that can be tailored to meet the interests and needs of different tourists. In Timor-Leste these niche tourism markets were proposed as pertaining to dive tourism, cruise tourism, ecotourism, and food and coffee tourism (The Asia Foundation, 2018), and have been reaffirmed by visitor data which indicated that the most popular leisure activities among travellers were diving and snorkelling (69%), beach activities (51%), visiting historical sites (39%), cultural activities (32%) and hiking (27%; The Asia Foundation, 2020a).

While, as in other countries, the aim of tourism development in Timor-Leste is to increase its contribution to economic development and growth, if conducted in a sustainable and inclusive manner,

tourism also has the potential to benefit diverse stakeholders and to positively address a broad set of societal issues. This includes tourism's impacts on gender equality, social-cultural issues and the environment, given that sustainable development requires resilient communities and a healthy environment. Fifty-four percent of people employed in the global tourism industry are women, higher than the proportion of women employed in other sectors of the economy (39%; World Bank, 2019). However, women in the global tourism industry earn 15 percent less than men (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2019). In Timor-Leste women comprise 62 percent of the accommodation and food service workforce; however, the average annual wage of this sector is USD \$2,100 less than the average income of other sectors (Government of Timor-Leste, 2017e). Through Sustainable Development Goal number 5, it is possible that "tourism can empower women, particularly through the provision of direct jobs and income generation in tourism and hospitality-related enterprises" (UNWTO, 2019, p. 172). While Timor-Leste's tourism policy aims to achieve widespread economic and social growth, tourism development in the country will have neither sustainable nor inclusive impacts if gender-specific constraints to women's participation in the sector are not addressed. Timor-Leste's Maubisse Declaration (Government of Timor-Leste, 2017d) articulates a whole-of-government approach to increasing rural women's participation in economic and productive sectors in tourism, commerce and industry, through access to markets, financial management and opportunities for developing their own businesses (Government of Timor-Leste, 2017a). Such institutional initiatives are necessary, especially in a country where patriarchal social norms hinder women's participation in society and ability to be empowered by tourism. In Timor-Leste women face more difficulties than men in accessing economic resources, such as land or contracts. Women were estimated to own 40 percent of microenterprises and around 16 percent of formalised businesses in 2010 (State Secretary for the Support and Promotion of Women in the Social Economy, 2017).

In the socio-cultural realm, while tourism can arguably contribute to peace and greater understanding between communities and improved standards of living, it can also potentially be a force for rapid and undesirable social change in host communities. In terms of the environment, while tourism may incentivise the preservation of 'unspoiled' natural attractions, uncontrolled or badly managed tourism development can threaten natural areas, including depleting natural resources such as water, energy, and food (which may already be limited in host communities), and increasing physical impacts such as the degradation of natural ecosystems.

Sustainable and inclusive tourism development has the potential to benefit neglected actors and aspects of the economy, while positively addressing a broad set of societal issues. Niche tourism is not only in demand (The Asia Foundation, 2020a) but can be developed in a focused manner allowing for high value experiences by tourists. One such niche that draws on Timor-Leste's unique history, environmental biodiversity and can contribute to empowerment is that of food tourism.



# Food & tourism in Timor-Leste

Currie (2015) suggested that Timorese history comprises a number of “stories” (p. 282) that are important and unique attributes of the country, which could potentially be promoted to tourists. This includes not just the history of events, but also the strength and resilience of the people who survived this history as told through their stories (Currie, 2015). Food can play an important role in this respect as food, beyond being a biological necessity, “is inseparable from powerful material and symbolic realities” (Abarca & Colby, 2016, p. 2). As discussed previously, place is a product of the intersection of social relations, expressions of identity and the practice of culture (Appadurai, 1996). Similarly, the connection between food and people is not static; it is dynamic and continuously changing (Abarca & Colby, 2016). Food and its cultural expression (cuisine) are a function of place and time. In this way, the connections between food, history and memory “produce narratives of personal and collective cultural and social identity by which people’s emotional, psychological, social, economic, political, historical, and cultural realities are embodied social and cultural realities” (Abarca & Colby, 2016, p. 4). It is not our food that defines social and cultural subjectivities,



rather it is the narratives, the food stories that we tell (Abarca & Colby, 2016). A key activity within tourism that can create synergies between culture, history and nature is an exploration of food, place and people, towards eliciting the “story” of the food of Timor-Leste (Berno, 2019).

As Szanto (2017, p. 2) asks in relation to food in Timor-Leste, “when dealing with the incredible layerings of food, place, history, society, development, migration, biodiversity, emotions, war, cuisine, markets, oral narrative, elections, currencies, and dozens of other agencies, what stories are we really entitled to tell, other than our own?”. We sought to explore how food stories and experiential culinary tourism can contribute to the development of a positive narrative of resilience in contemporary Timor-Leste, one that not only champions gender equality and economic opportunities, but one that can also facilitate the creation of shared futures in an otherwise divided post-conflict society.





## Methods

The research methodology comprised of a qualitative approach, utilising both focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The overarching research question was “What is the potential for food as a tourism attribute and attraction in Timor-Leste?” Through the interviews and focus groups, the following sub-questions were explored: what is Timorese cuisine and what are its origins; what are the food stories of Timor-Leste; and, how does food and its stories manifest in tourism in Timor-Leste?

Research was conducted in the sub-districts of Maubisse Villa and Fatubessi in municipality Ainaro, and in the nation's capital, Dili. Maubisse Villa was chosen as a fieldwork site as the Maubisse-Aileu Region has been identified as a regional hub for destination tourism development (including prospective sites for food and coffee tourism). Fatubessi was chosen due to its historic significance during the 1975 – 1999 Indonesian occupation. Fatubessi is home to an intricate cave system that was used as a place of shelter by FALINTIL (Forças de Defesa de Timor Leste) combatants and resident communities. Given this, a focus group discussion was held with the Fatubessi community with the objective of understanding linkages between food and history during this time. Fifteen people participated in the focus group discussions, comprising of community members and local administrators. Participants were asked to consider the history and origins of Timorese food, if and how it has changed over time and whether they believed that Timorese food could be highlighted as part of the tourist experience.



Seven semi-structured interviews were also held in the sub-district of Maubisse Villa in municipality Ainaro and an additional seven in municipality Dili. These interviews focused on restaurant owners and managers and their decisions about what they offered on their menus and their views on food tourism in Timor-Leste. Interviewees in Maubisse Villa had participated in culinary training conducted in 2019 on how to use local produce in their cooking, with an aim to develop new dishes representative of time and place (Timor-Leste Food Innovators Exchange, 2019). To understand the barriers and facilitators to food tourism in the region, questions about the level of uptake and continued use of this training were also asked. In addition to this, two of the seven interviews in Maubisse Villa were with military veterans with a focus on whether survival foods during the resistance had evolved or been maintained over time.

Given the extensive number of restaurants in Dili, a sample of seven restaurants was selected representing those that offered Timorese, Indonesian or Portuguese cuisines. Interviewees from these restaurants were either owners or managers. Menus were collected from each restaurant and content-analysed alongside information collected from the semi-structured interviews.



# Results

## WHAT IS TIMORESE CUISINE?

The focus groups and semi-structured interviews revealed that “Timorese cuisine” is multi-faceted with several layers of meanings. Although most focus group participants and interviewees talked about “local foods”, this did not necessarily refer to Timorese cuisine. Rather, “local foods” referred to the use of fresh local products and/or produce, which are then used in Indonesian, Portuguese, Timorese or other cuisines.

Both traditional Timorese and Portuguese dishes are considered to be “Timorese cuisine”. Although Indonesian food is widely available and commonly consumed, the participants did not consider it to be Timorese cuisine. Traditional Timorese cuisine – dishes such as batar da’an (a squash, bean and maize stew), dried cassava, etc. – tended to be viewed by participants as food that should be consumed at home or in the village. Although there were some notable exceptions in Dili, there was an absence of traditional dishes in public spaces like restaurants, hotels and guesthouses. Participants reported that traditional Timorese dishes are common in homes, but they are not eaten on a daily basis. This, they reported, was due to a lack of supply of traditional ingredients (many are region-specific and not readily available in the markets, are seasonal or need to be foraged) and the lengthy preparation times for many of the dishes. These “wild foods” (Castro, 2013, p. 22) are considered to be inconvenient in comparison to foods such as rice and noodles. This is a theme that recurred in



interviews with restaurant owners, discussed further below. A similar classification to what was described as traditional dishes are those that are considered “ceremony foods”. These are traditional Timorese dishes that are used for traditional ceremonial and ritual purposes; for example, tukir (meat cooked in bamboo tubes), hakmerik rice (rice, cassava leaves and candlenut) and etu sedok (a rice and bean dish). These foods are also ones that tend to be eaten in private spaces such as homes and villages.

Participants explained that knowledge about these traditional dishes, particularly preparation methods, is taught intergenerationally through oral tradition, and very few of them are recorded in the form of recipes or cookbooks. This transmission of knowledge for

traditional and ceremonial foods is particularly important as many of these traditional dishes utilise toxic or highly bitter ingredients (“wild foods”) that require careful and time-consuming preparation to render them safe and palatable. For example, koto moruk or ‘poison beans’ must be boiled 12 times, with the water changed in between each boiling.

As part of the fieldwork undertaken in Maubisse, two veterans of the resistance were interviewed about “survival foods” – the foods that they were able to forage seasonally and eat for survival during the Indonesian occupation. Both veterans spoke of eating wild leaves, bitter beans, foraged tubers and fruits, and animal protein (only on occasions when they were able to hunt). These were the foods that they consumed from 1975 to 2000 out of necessity for survival. The veterans said that very few of these “survival foods” were served anymore. Some of the ingredients are currently consumed – for example, koto-tisi leaves and beans, maek (elephant foot yam) and sago – but they are prepared in more contemporary and innovative ways. Other foods of the occupation era are no longer consumed as they are hard to find (they must be foraged) and there is a lack of knowledge about them. The veterans also said that they chose not to share these survival foods with their families and children for two reasons: (1) no one asks about the survival foods anymore; and (2) they do not want their children to suffer as these foods are viewed as foods of hard times. These findings are similar to those of Castro (2013, p. 22) who found that

“Wild foods are not being used on a daily basis as they are believed to be foods for bad times: famine, extremely bad economic situations or war. Their consumption is undesirable. Nonetheless, we witnessed the selling of ready-to-eat (midar) koto-moruk in Atsabe market during our fieldwork stay in Malabe. Wild foods and other famine foods that require a laborious preparation process which make them inconvenient, may be shifting from a marginal presence in people’s diet to a market product.

These data suggest that traditional Timorese cuisine continues to be relevant in contemporary society, but that with a few exceptions (discussed below), it is relatively unseen in tourism and hospitality contexts.

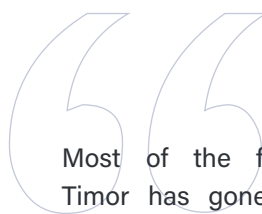
A further classification of Timorese food that participants talked about was “celebration foods”. These comprise mainly Portuguese dishes that are made with local ingredients and are present at occasions such as parties and festivities. Portuguese food is also common on restaurant menus and in shops in Timor-Leste. When asked about whether Portuguese food is considered to be Timorese food, participants indicated that yes, it is. Indonesian food, particularly warung-style dishes is also very common on menus in Timor-Leste. Although Indonesian food is not classified as Timorese cuisine, all of the guest houses included in the research offered it to their guests. When asked about the predominance of these Indonesian dishes on their menus, guest-house owners said that is what they believed their guests preferred. They also emphasised the availability of the ingredients locally and that, unlike inconvenient traditional dishes, Indonesian cuisine is convenient.

## TELLING THE STORY

Interviews with seven restaurant owners or managers in Dili confirmed many of the findings from the fieldwork undertaken in Maubisse and Fatubessi. Several consistent themes emerged from these interviews. Three of the restaurants served traditional Timorese cuisine; the others served Indonesian and/or Portuguese food. Regardless of what style cuisine they offered, all but one of the owner/managers agreed that Timorese food had the potential to be a tourism attraction.

A consistent theme for the restaurants serving Indonesian or Portuguese food was that they served “local food” (meaning dishes using local products and produce), but despite most seeing value in doing so, they were reluctant to serve traditional Timorese food. Echoing the concerns of guest house owners in Maubisse and Fatubessi, these restaurateurs spoke of customer preference for Indonesian or Portuguese foods, the higher cost of and lack of access to traditional ingredients and the significantly longer time that it took to prepare them, particularly

bean dishes. A significant theme around knowledge and food stories emerged about serving traditional Timorese cuisine. These four restaurateurs from the Indonesian and Portuguese restaurants all spoke of a lack of knowledge of traditional cooking methods and of the need to be able to tell the “food story” of traditional Timorese dishes if they were to serve them – something they did not believe that they had the skills and knowledge to do. The owner of a Portuguese restaurant indicated that although he did not know the stories of Timorese food himself, he recognised the relationship between food, place and people when he said,



Most of the food available here in Timor has gone through the evolution from Indonesian occupation and also Portuguese time. I believe that there is an interesting story about Timor-Leste that is a link to food during the resistance, but Timorese people need to know and learn more on their traditional food.

There is only a small number of restaurants and catering operations in Dili that serve Timorese cuisine. Three of the restaurants included in the research have as their primary focus traditional Timorese cuisine. All of these restaurateurs saw potential for traditional Timorese cuisine to be a tourism attraction, with one of them saying that there was “a huge potential [for] developing food as a tourism product.” Prior to the COVID-19-related decline in tourist numbers, these restaurants were known as establishments where tourists could sample Timorese cuisine. Owners/managers of these Timorese restaurants emphasised the use of fresh, local products with estimates being that 90 to 99 percent of the products they used were local. All three restaurants drew on traditional knowledge about Timorese ingredients and cuisine in planning their menus, often getting information from extended family and/or their restaurant staff. One restaurant in particular encouraged staff to be creative and come up with innovative ways to present traditional Timorese foods and to tell the stories









## Discussion

As a least-developed country and a small island nation highly dependent on oil to drive its economy, Timor-Leste faces many challenges. Tourism development has been identified as one way to diversify the economy, while creating benefits for a diverse group of stakeholders and positively addressing a broad set of societal issues. This includes tourism's impacts on gender equality, social-cultural issues, and the environment. It has only been relatively recently that attention has been paid to the relationship between food production systems, culinary traditions, tourist consumption and sustainability. These relationships, however, can be critical to sustainability (Berno, 2020; Berno, Devlin, Ezaki, Wilson, & Wolf, 2014). This research, therefore, sought to explore how the food of Timor-Leste as experienced through tourism can contribute to the development of a positive narrative of resilience in contemporary Timor-Leste.

Food and foodways reflect the rich and complex histories of the regions and countries in which they are situated. The "food stories" of Timor-Leste tell the tale of colonisation, invasion, struggle, conflict and occupation. They also tell a story of resilience, and with one restaurant actively exploring food innovation within Timorese culinary traditions, there is also evidence of 'new nation identity building' through cuisine. But what do these stories mean for tourism?

## THE POTENTIAL FOR TIMORESE CUISINE IN TOURISM

The majority of participants in the research believed that Timorese food could be part of Timor-Leste's tourism offerings. This use of food in tourism articulates well with the "culture" and "exploration" aspects of the current tourism marketing strategy. It can also potentially contribute to addressing broader development goals, including the SDGs, by creating opportunities by growing markets for local agricultural products, increasing retention of the tourist dollar through reducing food-related economic leakage and providing direct jobs and income generation for women in food-related enterprises, particularly in rural areas such as Maubisse and Fatubessi.

Although there has been the recent emergence of restaurants featuring traditional Timorese cuisine, this has been centralised in Dili where there is a higher concentration of both tourists and expatriates. There have been training programmes offered for restaurants in municipalities on how and why to serve traditional Timorese cuisine to travellers (see, for example, Timor-Leste Food Innovators Exchange, 2019), but uptake has been limited with only 20 percent of restaurants using the training to create new menu dishes in the longer term (The Asia Foundation, 2020b). Interestingly the same proportion (20%) of restaurants that had received training said that they were able to explain the ingredients and describe the food items (The Asia Foundation, 2020b). The data suggest that there are two key issues for operators not currently serving Timorese cuisine: (1) having the knowledge and confidence to prepare the food appropriately; and (2) the ability to tell the "food story". This suggests that technical cookery training alone may not be enough to support operators in offering Timorese cuisine. In addition to teaching culinary skills, there is also a need to intertwine technical skills and product development with experiential components of Timorese cuisine. This goes beyond just being able to describe a dish, and speaks to the articulation of social relations, expressions of identity and the practice of culture as it is manifested through food and place (Appadurai, 1996) and told through "food stories".

The centralisation of tourism and Timorese restaurants in Dili suggests that a partnership approach to food tourism may be required, particularly in relation to food tourism in rural regions such as Maubisse. Demand generation will need to be done in Dili, as it is the international gateway and conduit to Timor-Leste for tourists. Dili-based purveyors of traditional Timorese foods have greater foot traffic and opportunities to refine their product/experience. This is something that can be shared with rural partners as part of an enhanced skills and knowledge training, as discussed above.

Despite the affirmation of the potential role of Timorese cuisine in tourism, not all operators were prepared to feature Timorese dishes on their menus. Several guesthouse owners and restaurateurs were reluctant to put these traditional dishes on their menus, as it was their perception that there was limited demand for them. This demand factor is relatively unknown, however. In Timor-Leste, tourist expenditure on food and beverage is assessed, but specifically what type of food and beverage is purchased and consumed is not. Although there is anecdotal evidence from owners and managers of Timorese restaurants that there is tourist demand for their cuisine, data on what tourists want to eat and why is needed.

## WHO CAN TELL THE "FOOD STORIES"?

There exists a strong link between history and tourism in Timor-Leste. The Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan (2011–2030) (2010) identifies historical and cultural tourism, inclusive of the history of the resistance against the Indonesian occupation, as having potential for tourism. This potential for a historic tourism process to preserve and promote (from a tourism perspective) the history associated with the Indonesian occupation has also been suggested by the establishment of the Timorese Resistance Archive and Museum and the more recent Centro Nacional Chega! Indeed, stories of the resistance and its heroes are so embedded in the tourism product that the Boneca de Ataúro (a women's cooperative that produces embroidered dolls, bags, education toys and other sewn items on Atauro Island) makes and sells camouflage clad resistance leader dolls as tourist souvenirs. The data,

however, suggest that this ability to 'package and sell' stories of the resistance does not necessarily extend to its food. The reluctance of the veterans to share the food and food stories of the occupation suggests that there remains unaddressed trauma associated with these memories – especially when the stories linking food to the resistance are being told by veterans. This raises important considerations about who is entitled to tell the story of war/food/resistance, wherein those that can, perhaps cannot, unless a reconciliatory process is first followed. Szanto (2017, pp. 5–6) questioned what food stories we are entitled to tell other than our own and recognised,



The important role that storytelling has in preserving and enacting culture, in claiming power back from the 'official' writers of history, in owning one's identity, in teaching and learning, and in celebrating the intensely heterogeneous experience of making, sharing, and eating food.

Only the people of Timor-Leste can tell their food stories, and it is their domain as to what and with whom they share.

Tourism in Timor-Leste can simultaneously facilitate economic growth and create synergies between culture, history and nature. While the country's history has the potential to be developed into a niche tourism product in of itself, the people who bear the experience relating to this time continue to progress through a process of post-conflict healing and reconciliation. Food, as a product, transcends time and place. By exploring Timorese cuisine and the stories that it holds, there exists an opportunity to discover its unique identity. The research in this paper emphasises the need for an inclusive process of developing Timorese food not as a product, but as a form of experiential culinary tourism. It will be a process that, through its co-creation, can facilitate the development of shared inter-generational futures and, in doing so, develop a niche tourism product for Timor-Leste that extends from the fragility of its history through to the resilience of its people.

Figure 1. Map of Timor-Leste (United Nations, 2011).



