

Muhammad EID BALBAA,
Associate Professor, Department of World Economy and
International Economic Relations,
Tashkent State University of Economics,
Doctor of Economic Sciences

CULINARY TOURISM IN UZBEKISTAN: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF NATIONAL CUISINE AS A CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC ASSET

Abstract: Culinary tourism is one of the fastest-growing segments of global tourism, driven by rising demand for authentic cultural and gastronomic experiences. Globally, the culinary tourism market was valued at approximately USD 1.24 trillion in 2025 and is projected to exceed USD 4.25 trillion by 2034, reflecting the rapid growth of experiential travel. Uzbekistan, located on the ancient Silk Road, has a rich culinary heritage shaped by intercultural exchange, traditional lifestyles, and regional diversity. This study examines Uzbek national cuisine as both a cultural heritage asset and an economic resource for tourism development. Based on descriptive qualitative analysis of secondary data, the paper explores the cultural value, economic contribution, opportunities, and challenges of culinary tourism in Uzbekistan. The findings show that traditional dishes such as plov, somsa, shashlik, lagman, and non attract international tourists while supporting local businesses, employment, and regional development. Tourism growth in Uzbekistan has accelerated, with international arrivals increasing from 6.6 million in 2023 to about 8 million in 2024, while tourism revenues exceeded USD 3.5 billion. The study concludes that culinary tourism can strengthen Uzbekistan's global tourism competitiveness through integrated marketing, digital promotion, culinary festivals, and sustainable tourism policies.

Keywords: Culinary tourism, gastronomic tourism, national cuisine, cultural heritage, tourism development, sustainable tourism, economic asset.

Аннотация. Кулинарный туризм является одним из наиболее быстрорастущих сегментов мирового туризма, что обусловлено растущим спросом на аутентичный культурный и гастрономический опыт. В мировом масштабе рынок кулинарного туризма в 2025 году оценивался примерно в 1,24 трлн долл. США и, по прогнозам, к 2034 году превысит 4,25 трлн долл. США, что отражает быстрый рост туризма, основанного на впечатлениях. Узбекистан, расположенный на древнем Шёлковом пути, обладает богатым кулинарным наследием, сформированным под влиянием межкультурного обмена, традиционного образа жизни и регионального многообразия. В данном исследовании узбекская национальная кухня рассматривается как объект культурного наследия и одновременно как экономический ресурс развития туризма. На основе описательного качественного анализа вторичных данных в статье изучаются культурная ценность, экономический вклад, возможности и проблемы развития кулинарного туризма в Узбекистане. Результаты показывают, что такие традиционные блюда, как плов, самса, шашлык, лагман и нон, привлекают иностранных туристов, одновременно поддерживая местный бизнес, занятость населения и региональное развитие. Рост туризма в Узбекистане значительно ускорился: число международных туристских прибытий увеличилось с 6,6 млн в 2023 году до примерно 8 млн в 2024 году, а доходы от туризма превысили 3,5 млрд долл. США. В исследовании сделан вывод о том, что кулинарный туризм способен укрепить глобальную конкурентоспособность Узбекистана посредством интегрированного маркетинга, цифрового продвижения, гастрономических фестивалей и политики устойчивого туризма.

Ключевые слова: кулинарный туризм, гастрономический туризм, национальная кухня, культурное наследие, развитие туризма, устойчивый туризм, экономический ресурс.

1. Introduction

Tourism has become one of the most influential sectors of the global economy, contributing significantly to economic growth, employment generation, cultural exchange, and regional development. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), global tourism contributed approximately 10.3% of global GDP in 2025, while international tourism spending reached nearly USD 11.7 trillion with more than 1.5 billion international tourist movements worldwide. Within this rapidly evolving industry, culinary tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing forms of cultural and experiential tourism.

Culinary tourism, also known as gastronomic tourism or food tourism, refers to travel experiences motivated by the exploration of local food, traditional cooking methods, culinary heritage, and gastronomy-related cultural practices. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) recognizes gastronomy tourism as an important tool for sustainable tourism development because it links agriculture, culture, hospitality, and local economic development.

Globally, demand for culinary tourism has expanded considerably in recent years. Research forecasts indicate that the global culinary tourism market is expected to grow at annual rates exceeding 14–20% during the next decade. Furthermore, approximately 95% of international travelers participate in food-related tourism activities during their trips, demonstrating the increasing role of gastronomy in destination competitiveness.

Uzbekistan possesses significant potential for culinary tourism development due to its strategic historical position along the Silk Road and its rich gastronomic traditions. Uzbek cuisine represents a synthesis of Turkic, Persian, Arab, Mongolian, and Russian cultural influences that evolved over centuries of trade and migration. Traditional dishes such as plov, somsa, lagman, manti, and shashlik reflect the country's cultural diversity and social traditions.

The government of Uzbekistan has increasingly prioritized tourism as a strategic sector for economic diversification. Tourism reforms, visa liberalization, infrastructure modernization, and international tourism promotion have contributed to rapid tourism growth. International tourist arrivals increased from approximately 6.6 million visitors in 2023 to nearly 8 million visitors in 2024, while tourism exports rose from USD 2.14 billion to USD 3.52 billion during the same period. Moreover, Uzbekistan ranked among the world's fastest-growing tourism destinations in 2025, with more than 10.7 million foreign tourists visiting the country within the first eleven months of the year.

Despite this rapid tourism expansion, academic research focusing specifically on culinary tourism in Uzbekistan remains limited. Existing studies often discuss gastronomy as a component of cultural tourism without comprehensively examining its dual role as a cultural and economic asset. Therefore, this study aims to analyze culinary tourism in Uzbekistan through a descriptive assessment of national cuisine, tourism development, and economic opportunities.

The main objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the cultural significance of Uzbek national cuisine;
2. To analyze the economic role of culinary tourism in Uzbekistan;

3. To evaluate global and national culinary tourism trends;
4. To identify opportunities and challenges in developing gastronomic tourism in Uzbekistan.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Concept and Evolution of Culinary Tourism

Culinary tourism refers to tourism activities associated with experiencing local food culture, gastronomy, and culinary traditions. According to Long (2004), culinary tourism enables tourists to experience cultural identity through food consumption and food-related experiences. Food has evolved from being a secondary tourism activity into a primary travel motivation.

UN Tourism emphasizes that gastronomy tourism contributes to sustainable tourism by preserving local heritage, supporting local economies, and encouraging community participation. Scholars argue that food tourism creates emotional and cultural connections between tourists and destinations, thereby increasing tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty.

Globally, culinary tourism has experienced rapid expansion due to changing tourist preferences. Contemporary tourists increasingly seek authentic experiences involving local traditions, cultural immersion, and experiential travel. The culinary tourism market reached approximately USD 1.24 trillion in 2025 and is forecast to exceed USD 4.25 trillion by 2034. Similarly, Grand View Research estimated the global culinary tourism market at USD 16.1 billion in 2025 with projected annual growth exceeding 21%.

These trends demonstrate the growing strategic importance of gastronomy within international tourism markets.

2.2 Culinary Tourism and Cultural Heritage

Cuisine represents an essential element of intangible cultural heritage because it preserves traditions, customs, rituals, and collective memory. Food preparation methods, dining rituals, and local ingredients often reflect historical interactions and social structures.

Uzbek cuisine represents one of the richest gastronomic traditions in Central Asia. Due to its location along the Silk Road, Uzbekistan historically functioned as a crossroads of civilizations, facilitating cultural and culinary exchange. Uzbek dishes incorporate influences from Persian, Turkic, Mongolian, and Russian cuisines while maintaining distinct local characteristics.

The preparation and sharing of plov (pilaf) was recognized by UNESCO as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity due to its social and cultural significance. Plov symbolizes hospitality, solidarity, and community identity within Uzbek society. Traditional cooking practices are closely linked to weddings, religious celebrations, and social gatherings.

Research suggests that culinary heritage strengthens destination branding because food serves as a recognizable cultural symbol. Gastronomy therefore enhances tourism competitiveness by differentiating destinations within increasingly competitive global tourism markets.

2.3 Culinary Tourism and Economic Development

Numerous studies emphasize the economic importance of culinary tourism.

Gastronomy tourism stimulates tourism expenditures while supporting related sectors such as agriculture, hospitality, transportation, handicrafts, and food production.

Food-related spending constitutes a significant proportion of tourist expenditures globally. Culinary tourism also supports small and medium enterprises (SMEs), local farmers, and rural communities by increasing demand for local products and traditional food services.

According to global tourism studies, gastronomy tourism contributes to:

- Employment generation;
- Regional economic diversification;
- Agricultural value chain development;
- Rural tourism development;
- Cultural preservation;
- Sustainable tourism growth.

Several countries have successfully integrated culinary tourism into national tourism strategies. For example, regions such as Catalonia, Italy, Thailand, and Japan actively promote gastronomy as a core tourism product.

2.4 Gastronomic Tourism in Uzbekistan

Recent tourism reforms have significantly increased Uzbekistan's tourism competitiveness. The tourism sector contributes approximately 3.5% of Uzbekistan's GDP and represents one of the country's fastest-growing service industries.

International tourism arrivals increased substantially after tourism liberalization reforms:

- 6.6 million international visitors in 2023;
- Nearly 8 million visitors in 2024;
- More than 10.7 million visitors during the first eleven months of 2025.

Academic studies indicate that gastronomy tourism represents a promising niche market for Uzbekistan because tourists increasingly seek authentic Silk Road experiences. Uzbek cuisine is often identified as one of the country's most distinctive cultural attractions.

Cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, and Tashkent possess strong gastronomic tourism potential due to their historical significance and culinary traditions. Traditional bazaars, tea houses, and local restaurants provide opportunities for experiential tourism activities including cooking workshops, food tours, and cultural dining experiences.

However, researchers also identify several challenges including limited international culinary branding, insufficient digital promotion, infrastructural constraints, and limited integration between tourism stakeholders and food producers.

3. Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research methodology based on secondary data analysis.

3.1 Research Design

The research adopts a descriptive analytical approach to examine the cultural and economic role of culinary tourism in Uzbekistan. The study focuses on understanding tourism trends, cultural heritage, and economic contributions associated with Uzbek national cuisine.

3.2 Data Sources

The study utilizes secondary data collected from:

- UN Tourism reports;
- World Bank tourism statistics;
- Uzbekistan tourism authorities;
- Academic journal articles;
- Market research reports;
- Government tourism publications;
- UNESCO heritage documentation.

3.3 Analytical Approach

The analysis is organized into four thematic areas:

1. Global culinary tourism trends;
2. Cultural significance of Uzbek cuisine;
3. Economic contribution of gastronomic tourism;
4. Opportunities and challenges for tourism development.

Descriptive analysis is used to synthesize tourism statistics, tourism growth indicators, and cultural tourism findings.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Global Growth of Culinary Tourism

The findings demonstrate that culinary tourism has become a major component of global tourism markets. The global culinary tourism market exceeded USD 1.24 trillion in 2025 and is projected to grow rapidly during the next decade.

Several factors explain this growth:

- Rising demand for authentic experiences;
- Social media influence on food culture;
- Growth of experiential tourism;
- Increased international mobility;
- Expansion of cultural tourism markets.

Additionally, tourism experts report that food experiences increasingly influence destination choice among international tourists. Culinary tourism therefore functions as both a cultural attraction and an economic development strategy.

4.2 Uzbek Cuisine as a Cultural Asset

Uzbek cuisine represents a central component of national identity and cultural heritage. Traditional food practices preserve historical traditions and social customs while strengthening intergenerational cultural transmission.

The study identifies several cultural dimensions of Uzbek cuisine:

Cultural Element	Significance
Plov Tradition	Symbol of hospitality and social unity
Traditional Bread (Non)	Cultural and spiritual importance
Tea Culture	Representation of respect and hospitality
Communal Dining	Strengthens social relationships
Silk Road Influence	Reflects intercultural exchange

Plov remains the most internationally recognized Uzbek dish. Its preparation often involves collective participation and ceremonial importance. UNESCO

recognition further increased its international visibility and tourism appeal.

4.3 Economic Contribution of Culinary Tourism in Uzbekistan

The tourism sector in Uzbekistan has expanded rapidly during recent years. Tourism revenues exceeded USD 3.5 billion in 2024, reflecting substantial growth compared to previous years.

Culinary tourism contributes economically through several channels:

Economic Sector	Contribution
Hospitality	Restaurant and hotel revenue growth
Agriculture	Increased demand for local food products
SMEs	Expansion of family-owned restaurants and food vendors
Employment	Job creation in tourism and food services
Regional Development	Tourism growth in historical cities

The rapid increase in tourist arrivals creates favorable conditions for gastronomy tourism expansion. Culinary tourism particularly benefits cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva where historical tourism combines naturally with traditional cuisine experiences.

Furthermore, culinary tourism encourages sustainable local economic development because it promotes local agricultural products and community-based tourism services.

4.4 Challenges Facing Culinary Tourism Development

Despite strong potential, several limitations remain:

Limited Global Culinary Branding

Uzbek cuisine lacks strong international branding compared to globally recognized cuisines such as Italian, Japanese, or Turkish cuisine.

Infrastructural Constraints

Some tourism regions still face transportation and hospitality infrastructure limitations.

Limited Digital Promotion

Digital marketing and international culinary tourism promotion remain underdeveloped.

Human Capital Challenges

Professional culinary training and hospitality education require modernization to meet international tourism standards.

Limited Integration of Tourism Stakeholders

Cooperation between tourism agencies, restaurants, farmers, and local producers remains insufficient.

4.5 Opportunities for Future Development

The findings suggest substantial opportunities for future growth:

- Development of culinary tourism routes;
- International food festivals;
- Cooking workshops for tourists;
- Promotion of UNESCO-recognized heritage cuisine;
- Digital tourism marketing strategies;
- Cooperation with international chefs and influencers;
- Integration of gastronomy into national tourism branding;

Uzbekistan's increasing international tourism visibility creates favorable conditions for becoming a leading gastronomic tourism destination in Central Asia.

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Freshita QAUMY,
Lecturer, Department of Tourism and Hotel Business,
Tashkent State University of Economics

NEW FACTORS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GLOBAL TOURISM MARKET

Abstract: This article analyzes the key transformational processes taking place in the global tourism industry by 2026. It highlights digital technologies, artificial intelligence, changing consumer behavior, and the growing development of experience-oriented tourism as the main driving factors. In addition, the study examines, from a scientific perspective, the impact of sustainability, innovation tourism, hyper-personalization, and the “bleisure” trend on the tourism industry. As a result, it is substantiated that modern tourism is evolving through the integration of technological advancement and human needs.

Keywords: global tourism, transformational processes, digital technologies, consumer behavior, sustainability, innovation tourism, bleisure tourism, tourism industry, digital transformation, tourist demand, tourism market, global economy.

Annotatsiya Ushbu maqolada 2026-yilga kelib global turizm industriyasida yuz berayotgan asosiy transformatsion jarayonlar tahlil qilinadi. Unda raqamli texnologiyalar, sun'iy intellekt, iste'molchilar xulq-atvorining o'zgarishi va tajribaga yo'naltirilgan (taassurotlar) turizmning jadal rivojlanishi bosh harakatlantiruvchi omillar sifatida ko'rsatib o'tilgan. Bundan tashqari, tadqiqotda barqarorlik, innovatsion turizm, giper-personallashtirish va “bleisure” (ishbilarmonlik va hordiq sayohatlarining uyg'unlashuvi) trendining turizm sanoatiga ta'siri ilmiy nuqtayi nazardan ko'rib chiqiladi. Natijada, zamonaviy turizm texnologik taraqqiyot va inson ehtiyojlarining integratsiyalashuvi orqali rivojlanib borayotgani asoslab berilgan.

Kalit so'zlar: global turizm, transformatsion jarayonlar, raqamli texnologiyalar, iste'molchi xulq-atvori, barqarorlik, innovatsion turizm, bleisure turizm, turizm industriyasi, raqamli transformatsiya, turistik talab, turizm bozori, global iqtisodiyot.