

PERCEPTION AND ACCEPTANCE OF INDIGENOUS FOODS AT CULTURAL EVENTS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Indigenous foods remain important expressions of cultural identity, hospitality, social memory, nutrition, and local food knowledge in Nigeria. They are commonly prepared, displayed, and consumed during festivals, traditional marriages, naming ceremonies, religious gatherings, coronations, funerals, and community celebrations (Ajayi & Bello, 2021; Nwankwo & Umeh, 2023). Despite their cultural and economic relevance, their acceptance is increasingly shaped by urbanisation, globalisation, Western dietary influence, modern lifestyle changes, poor presentation, weak documentation, and limited integration into formal hospitality and tourism systems (Chukwu & Dogbe, 2023; Eze & Okoye, 2022). This article examines the perception and acceptance of indigenous foods within the context of cultural events in Nigeria. It adopts a qualitative conceptual review approach and draws on recent literature on indigenous food systems, food tourism, cultural identity, nutrition transition, and hospitality development. The review shows that taste, cultural attachment, nutritional awareness, accessibility, affordability, social influence, hygiene, and presentation are major determinants of acceptance (Alabi et al., 2025; Orga & Dalhatu, 2024). The article argues that indigenous foods can contribute to cultural preservation, public health, local economic development, culinary tourism, and national identity when properly documented, branded, promoted, and integrated into hospitality and tourism services (Richards, 2021; Timothy, 2021). The study recommends improved food presentation, recipe documentation, media promotion, youth engagement, food festivals, policy support, and the inclusion of indigenous cuisine in hospitality and tourism programmes.

Keywords: *indigenous foods, cultural events, food perception, culinary tourism, cultural identity, Nigeria, hospitality*

Introduction

Food is not only a biological necessity; it is also a cultural language through which societies communicate identity, memory, belonging, hospitality, and shared values. Across the world, indigenous foods have become increasingly important in discussions on sustainable food systems, cultural heritage, tourism, nutrition, and community resilience (FAO et al., 2021; Timothy, 2021). Indigenous foods are rooted in local environments, traditional knowledge, seasonal availability, communal practices, and historical experience. They often reflect how communities have adapted to their ecological conditions through farming, gathering, processing, preservation, preparation, and ceremonial consumption (FAO et al., 2021).

Globally, the renewed interest in indigenous foods is connected to concerns about nutrition transition, biodiversity loss, food insecurity, cultural erosion, and the dominance of highly processed diets. Indigenous food systems are increasingly recognised as valuable because they often depend on local crops, local processing techniques, community labour, intergenerational knowledge, and low-waste food practices (FAO et al., 2021; Okafor & Adebayo, 2022). In tourism and hospitality, food has also become a powerful means of experiencing place. Gastronomic tourism research shows that local food experiences help visitors connect with the history, identity, and everyday life of destinations, making food an important part of cultural tourism and destination branding (Richards, 2021; Timothy, 2021). Therefore, indigenous foods are no longer viewed only as household meals; they are increasingly seen as cultural products, tourism resources, and instruments of sustainable development.

In Africa, food plays a central role in social organisation, spirituality, celebration, kinship, and communal hospitality. Across the continent, indigenous foods are prepared and served during festivals, weddings, coronations, funerals, naming ceremonies, harvest celebrations, religious gatherings, and community meetings (Ogundele & Aremu, 2020; Okafor & Adebayo, 2022). These foods are not merely consumed for satisfaction; they are tied to identity, respect, age-grade relations, rites of passage, and collective memory. African indigenous food systems are commonly built around grains, roots, tubers, vegetables, legumes, fruits, spices, fermented products, animal proteins, and local beverages (Okafor & Adebayo, 2022). Within cultural

events, food provides more than nourishment: it marks status, expresses generosity, welcomes strangers, honours ancestral traditions, and strengthens social bonds.

However, African indigenous foods also face growing pressure from globalisation, urban lifestyles, imported foods, fast-food culture, and the perception that Western-style food is more modern or prestigious (Chukwu & Dogbe, 2023; Eze & Okoye, 2022). In many urban settings, younger people are increasingly exposed to processed meals, foreign restaurant brands, and social media food trends. As a result, some indigenous dishes are wrongly associated with backwardness, poor packaging, stress, or informality. These changing perceptions create a challenge for cultural preservation and hospitality development. If indigenous foods are not deliberately promoted, documented, improved, and integrated into formal hospitality systems, some recipes, meanings, and preparation techniques may gradually decline (Akinola & Adetunji, 2021).

Nigeria provides a rich context for examining indigenous foods because of its ethnic diversity, regional food cultures, agricultural variety, and strong ceremonial traditions. Nigerian foods such as pounded yam, amala, tuwo shinkafa, ofada rice, egusi soup, ogbono soup, ewedu, moin-moin, ogi, nono, wara, burukutu, suya, abacha, and various traditional soups represent more than diet; they are expressions of place, ethnicity, memory, and cultural pride (Ajayi & Bello, 2021; Ugoala, 2025). Indigenous foods are important expressions of cultural identity, hospitality, social memory, and sustainable food systems in Nigeria, especially during festivals, weddings, naming ceremonies, religious gatherings, and community celebrations (Nwankwo & Umeh, 2023; Orga & Dalhatu, 2024).

In Nigeria, cultural events provide important platforms for the preparation, display, and consumption of indigenous foods. Traditional marriages, naming ceremonies, coronations, festivals, religious celebrations, funerals, community tourism events, and harvest festivals all create opportunities for indigenous foods to be shared publicly (Ajayi & Bello, 2021; Nwankwo & Umeh, 2023). At such events, food performs symbolic roles. It may represent abundance, family honour, thanksgiving, unity, respect for guests, or connection to ancestral heritage. For example, pounded yam and egusi soup may be used to communicate abundance and respect, while amala with ewedu and gbegiri is strongly associated with Yoruba food culture. Tuwo shinkafa and miyan kuka remain important in many Northern Nigerian settings, while ofe nsala

and other soup-based dishes are associated with Igbo culinary identity (Ajayi & Bello, 2021; Ugoala, 2025). These foods communicate cultural meaning even before they are eaten.

Despite their importance, the perception and acceptance of indigenous foods in Nigeria are changing. Globalisation, urbanisation, modern work schedules, fast-food culture, social media influence, and Western dietary patterns have affected food choices, especially among young and urban consumers (Chukwu & Dogbe, 2023; Eze & Okoye, 2022). At the same time, recent research on indigenous Nigerian fermented agrifoods shows that locally produced foods such as ogi, abacha, burukutu, dawadawa, amala, wara, and nono are still nutritionally and culturally significant because they are derived from familiar agricultural raw materials and traditional processing systems (Obafemi et al., 2024).

This article therefore examines the perception and acceptance of indigenous foods within the context of cultural events in Nigeria. It discusses the meanings attached to indigenous foods, their role in cultural events, the factors influencing perception and acceptance, the challenges affecting their promotion, and the strategies required to reposition them within tourism, hospitality, and cultural development.

Conceptual Clarification

Indigenous Foods

Indigenous foods are traditional foods that originate from the cultural, ecological, and historical experiences of a people. They are usually prepared from locally available resources and shaped by indigenous knowledge systems (FAO et al., 2021; Ugoala, 2025). In Nigeria, indigenous foods include staples, soups, sauces, beverages, snacks, fermented foods, ceremonial dishes, and street foods. Examples include yam, cassava, millet, maize, pounded yam, amala, tuwo shinkafa, ofada rice, egusi soup, ogbono soup, ewedu, ogi, nono, wara, burukutu, moin-moin, akara, suya, and abacha (Obafemi et al., 2024; Ugoala, 2025).

Indigenous foods serve nutritional, cultural, economic, and environmental functions. Nutritionally, they provide energy, fibre, micronutrients, and protective compounds. Culturally, they preserve identity and traditional knowledge. Economically, they support farmers, processors, caterers, food vendors, and local markets. Environmentally, they promote the use of

local crops and food biodiversity (FAO et al., 2021; Ibrahim & Sadiq, 2022; Okafor & Adebayo, 2022). This makes indigenous foods significant not only as meals but also as part of cultural and economic life.

Perception and Acceptance

Perception refers to how people interpret, judge, and attach meaning to indigenous foods. It may be shaped by taste, upbringing, cultural background, education, family experience, media exposure, health awareness, social class, and presentation (Ajzen, 1991; Orga & Dalhatu, 2024). Acceptance refers to the willingness to consume, recommend, purchase, promote, or include indigenous foods in social and hospitality settings. A person may perceive indigenous food positively because of taste, memory, cultural pride, health value, or affordability. Another person may reject the same food because of poor packaging, hygiene concerns, unfamiliarity, inconvenience, or negative social labelling (Chukwu & Dogbe, 2023; Eze & Okoye, 2022).

In the context of cultural events, perception and acceptance are particularly important because food is part of the total guest experience. Guests may judge a ceremony not only by decoration, music, venue, or protocol, but also by the food served, how it is presented, how clean it appears, and whether it reflects the cultural identity of the host (Balogun & Adegbite, 2024; Richards, 2021).

Cultural Events

Cultural events are organised social occasions through which communities express shared values, identity, beliefs, history, and heritage. In Nigeria, such events include traditional festivals, weddings, naming ceremonies, coronations, religious celebrations, funerals, harvest festivals, and community tourism events (Nwankwo & Umeh, 2023; Timothy, 2021). Food is central to these occasions because it symbolises hospitality, respect, abundance, status, belonging, and continuity. Cultural events also keep indigenous foods visible by allowing younger generations to observe traditional food practices and participate in communal eating (Ajayi & Bello, 2021; Akinola & Adetunji, 2021).

Indigenous Foods, Nutrition, and Sustainability

Indigenous foods are important to nutrition and sustainability because they are often based on locally available crops, vegetables, legumes, cereals, spices, fermented foods, and animal products (FAO et al., 2021; Okafor & Adebayo, 2022). In Nigeria, traditional foods are commonly prepared from yam, cassava, maize, millet, sorghum, beans, vegetables, palm products, fish, meat, and spices. These foods can contribute to dietary diversity and reduce overdependence on imported or highly processed foods (Ibrahim & Sadiq, 2022; Obafemi et al., 2024).

Recent studies on indigenous Nigerian fermented agrifoods show that traditional processing methods such as fermentation can improve food preservation, digestibility, flavour, and nutritional quality. Obafemi et al. (2024) note that fermented Nigerian agrifoods are derived from agricultural raw materials such as maize, cassava, millet, sorghum, yam, and nuts, leading to products such as ogi, abacha, burukutu, dawadawa, amala, wara, and nono. This supports the argument that indigenous foods are not primitive or nutritionally irrelevant; rather, many are products of long-standing local food technologies.

The sustainability value of indigenous foods lies in their connection with local agriculture and biodiversity. When communities consume locally grown foods, they support farmers, processors, traders, food vendors, and caterers (Ibrahim & Sadiq, 2022; Okafor & Adebayo, 2022). Indigenous foods also encourage the continuity of crop varieties and processing methods that may otherwise decline under pressure from imported food systems. FAO et al. (2021) show that indigenous food systems are closely tied to traditional knowledge, diet diversity, resource management, and resilience.

Indigenous Foods and Cultural Identity

Food is one of the strongest markers of cultural identity. It connects people to family, language, ethnic group, place, memory, and social belonging (Ajayi & Bello, 2021; Timothy, 2021). At cultural events, indigenous foods help communities perform identity publicly. A Yoruba traditional marriage where amala, ewedu, gbegiri, pounded yam, or ofada rice is served does more than feed guests; it affirms a cultural setting. In the same way, the presence of *tuwo shinkafa*, *miyan kuka*, *masa*, or *kunu* at Northern Nigerian events reflects regional and cultural

identity, while Igbo soups and yam-based dishes carry their own cultural meanings (Ugoala, 2025).

Indigenous foods are displayed and consumed during festivals, weddings, naming ceremonies, religious gatherings, and community celebrations, where they function as expressions of cultural identity, hospitality, social memory, and sustainable food systems (Ajayi & Bello, 2021; Nwankwo & Umeh, 2023). Cultural attachment is therefore a major factor in food acceptance. Individuals who associate indigenous foods with childhood, family ceremonies, ethnic pride, or community belonging are more likely to value and consume them (Akinola & Adetunji, 2021).

Culinary tourism involves travel motivated partly or fully by the desire to experience local food, cooking methods, food markets, traditional meals, restaurants, and dining cultures (Richards, 2021; Timothy, 2021). Nigeria has strong culinary tourism potential because of its ethnic diversity and wide range of indigenous foods. Foods such as amala, ofada rice, suya, tuwo shinkafa, nkwobi, abacha, pounded yam, pepper soup, moin-moin, burukutu, kunu, and ogi can be developed into tourism experiences through festivals, food trails, cooking demonstrations, cultural markets, and restaurant branding (Balogun & Adegbite, 2024; Orga & Dalhatu, 2024).

Richards (2021), shows that food has become a major area of tourism research and destination experience. This is relevant to Nigeria because cultural events already provide platforms where food, performance, music, clothing, ritual, and community identity intersect. However, the tourism potential of indigenous foods remains underdeveloped. Many local dishes are still presented informally, without strong branding, storytelling, hygiene assurance, or menu interpretation (Balogun & Adegbite, 2024). Visitors may enjoy the food without understanding its history, ingredients, preparation process, or symbolic value.

Theoretical Framework

Theory of Planned Behaviour

The Theory of Planned Behaviour explains that human behaviour is influenced by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). In relation to indigenous foods, attitude refers to whether people view traditional foods as tasty, healthy, prestigious, culturally valuable, or outdated. Subjective norms refer to the influence of family, peers,

community expectations, cultural identity, and media. Perceived behavioural control refers to whether people believe indigenous foods are available, affordable, convenient, hygienic, and easy to access (Ajzen, 1991).

This theory is relevant because a person may value indigenous foods but may not consume them regularly if they are difficult to prepare, unavailable in restaurants, poorly packaged, or socially undervalued. Similarly, a young person may accept indigenous foods more readily if family members, influencers, chefs, schools, and hospitality brands present them as desirable and culturally meaningful.

Cultural Identity Theory

Cultural Identity Theory is useful because indigenous foods are symbolic resources through which individuals and communities express belonging. Food connects people to place, language, family, ethnicity, religion, and memory (Ajayi & Bello, 2021; Timothy, 2021). Nigerian foods such as pounded yam, amala, tuwo shinkafa, ofada rice, and ofe nsala are not only consumed; they help people recognise themselves within cultural communities. At cultural events, the serving of indigenous foods can therefore reinforce identity, continuity, and emotional connection (Akinola & Adetunji, 2021).

Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Diffusion of Innovation Theory explains how ideas, practices, and products spread within a society. Indigenous foods can gain wider acceptance when they are repositioned through improved presentation, digital media, food festivals, modern packaging, restaurant menus, culinary tourism, and hospitality education (Balogun & Adegbite, 2024; Richards, 2021). This theory helps explain how traditional foods can be preserved while still being adapted to modern consumption spaces.

Indigenous Foods Remain Central to Nigerian Cultural Events

The review shows that indigenous foods remain central to Nigerian cultural events. They are used to honour guests, express family generosity, strengthen communal ties, and preserve cultural memory (Ajayi & Bello, 2021; Nwankwo & Umeh, 2023). During traditional weddings,

food often communicates the seriousness of the host family's preparation. At naming ceremonies, food expresses joy, continuity, and communal support. During festivals, food becomes part of ritual performance, tourism experience, and collective celebration. At funerals, food may express respect, condolence, and social obligation. This supports the position that cultural events provide important platforms for the preparation, display, and consumption of indigenous foods in Nigeria (Nwankwo & Umeh, 2023). It also suggests that cultural events remain important spaces for transmitting food knowledge from older to younger generations (Akinola & Adetunji, 2021).

Nutrition Awareness Can Improve Acceptance

Nutritional awareness is another important factor. Many indigenous foods are rich in fibre, protein, vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and bioactive compounds when properly prepared (Obafemi et al., 2024; Olatunji & Akinyele, 2020). Fermented foods such as ogi, nono, wara, burukutu, and dawadawa are important examples of traditional food technologies with potential nutritional value (Akpogheli et al., 2025; Obafemi et al., 2024). However, nutritional acceptance may be weakened when indigenous foods are prepared with excessive oil, salt, seasoning, or oversized portions. Some urban consumers may also see traditional staples as too carbohydrate-heavy (Eze & Okoye, 2022). Hospitality practitioners can respond by improving recipe balance, offering vegetable-rich options, using moderate oil, and educating consumers about the nutritional value of indigenous foods.

Taste remains one of the strongest determinants of indigenous food acceptance. Many people accept indigenous foods because of their flavour, aroma, texture, spice combination, and emotional familiarity (Alabi et al., 2025; Orga & Dalhatu, 2024). Foods such as pounded yam and egusi soup, amala with ewedu and gbegiri, tuwo shinkafa with miyan kuka, ofada rice with ayamase, and moin-moin are not only meals but sensory experiences connected to memory and culture. However, taste is not static. Younger consumers exposed to fast foods, foreign dishes, and online food trends may develop different expectations (Chukwu & Dogbe, 2023; Eze & Okoye, 2022). Some may consider traditional foods too heavy, oily, spicy, or stressful to eat in formal settings. This means that caterers and hospitality professionals must preserve authentic taste while also considering portion size, serving method, spice level, and dietary preferences.

Presentation and Packaging Affect Modern Acceptance

Poor presentation remains one of the major challenges affecting indigenous food acceptance in formal hospitality settings. Some indigenous foods are nutritious and culturally meaningful but are not attractively plated, packaged, described, or served (Balogun & Adegbite, 2024). In hotels, restaurants, conferences, and high-profile events, guests often judge food by appearance before taste. Improving presentation does not mean abandoning tradition. Rather, it means presenting indigenous foods in clean, attractive, and dignified ways. For example, ofada rice can be served with well-portioned ayamase sauce and cultural garnish; moin-moin can be presented in leaf wraps or neat modern moulds; pounded yam and soups can be served in attractive traditional bowls; and local beverages can be branded for tourism events. This kind of presentation can make indigenous foods appealing to younger consumers, tourists, and formal hospitality markets (Balogun & Adegbite, 2024; Richards, 2021).

Media and Technology Can Reposition Indigenous Foods

Media and technology now play major roles in shaping food perception. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and food blogs influence what people consider attractive, modern, healthy, or fashionable. Indigenous foods can benefit from digital storytelling, food photography, recipe videos, cultural documentaries, influencer marketing, online menus, and delivery platforms (Balogun & Adegbite, 2024; Orga & Dalhatu, 2024). Technology can also improve preparation, preservation, packaging, and distribution. Food processing equipment, cold storage, hygienic packaging, digital ordering, and improved logistics can make indigenous foods safer, more convenient, and more accessible (Akpogheli et al., 2025; Obafemi et al., 2024). However, technology should support authenticity rather than erase it. The aim should be to modernise service and access while preserving taste, history, and cultural meaning.

Comparative Analysis of Indigenous and Western Foods

Feature	Indigenous Foods	Western/Foreign-Style Foods
Ingredients	Mostly local, seasonal, and culturally familiar	Often imported, processed, or commercially standardised
Preparation	May be time-consuming but culturally meaningful	Often faster and more convenient
Nutritional value	Can be high when properly prepared	Varies; fast-food forms may be less healthy
Cultural value	Strong symbolic and identity value	Limited local cultural meaning
Cost	Often affordable depending on location and ingredients	May be more expensive in formal settings
Sustainability	Supports local farmers, processors, and biodiversity	May increase dependence on imported food chains
Tourism value	Strong potential for culinary tourism and destination branding	Less useful for local heritage promotion

Source: Author's synthesis from reviewed literature (FAO et al., 2021; Okafor & Adebayo, 2022; Richards, 2021; Timothy, 2021).

The comparison does not suggest that all Western foods are unhealthy or that all indigenous foods are automatically healthy. Rather, it shows that indigenous foods possess strong cultural, nutritional, economic, and tourism value that can be better harnessed through improved presentation, safety, branding, and hospitality integration (Balogun & Adegbite, 2024; Okafor & Adebayo, 2022).

Policy Implications

Government and tourism agencies should recognise indigenous foods as cultural and economic assets. National and state tourism policies should include culinary tourism as part of destination development (Richards, 2021; Timothy, 2021). Food festivals, indigenous food exhibitions, cooking competitions, cultural markets, and regional food fairs can promote local cuisine and support small businesses (Balogun & Adegbite, 2024). Education policy is also important.

Schools, colleges, and universities should include indigenous food education, culinary heritage documentation, nutrition awareness, and practical cooking skills in relevant programmes (Akinola & Adetunji, 2021). Hospitality and tourism departments should train students to understand indigenous cuisine as part of professional practice, not merely as domestic food. Hotels, restaurants, event planners, and tourism operators should also be encouraged to include indigenous dishes in their menus. “Local cuisine first” policies can help strengthen cultural authenticity, improve tourist experience, and support local supply chains (Richards, 2021; Timothy, 2021).

Conclusion

Indigenous foods in Nigeria are more than dietary items, they embody cultural heritage, identity, social memory, sustainability, nutrition, and economic potential. Their role in cultural events reinforces their importance as symbols of hospitality, unity, tradition, and social interaction (Ajayi & Bello, 2021; Nwankwo & Umeh, 2023). However, globalization, urbanization, fast-food culture, weak documentation, poor presentation, and limited hospitality integration continue to challenge their acceptance in contemporary society (Chukwu & Dogbe, 2023; Eze & Okoye, 2022). The reviewed literature shows that perception and acceptance are shaped by taste, cultural attachment, awareness, nutrition, affordability, accessibility, presentation, hygiene, and social influence (Alabi et al., 2025; Orga & Dalhatu, 2024). While indigenous foods remain culturally valued, their future depends on deliberate repositioning. They must be preserved, documented, professionally presented, promoted through media, and integrated into tourism and hospitality systems.

Ultimately, the sustainability of indigenous foods requires collective action by government, communities, educational institutions, hospitality practitioners, media organisations, researchers, and tourism stakeholders. By preserving and promoting indigenous culinary heritage, Nigeria can strengthen cultural identity, support local livelihoods, improve public health, and expand its culinary tourism potential (FAO et al., 2021; Richards, 2021; Timothy, 2021).

Recommendations

The following were recommended:

1. Government and tourism boards should institutionalize national and regional indigenous food festivals as part of cultural tourism development.
2. Hotels, restaurants, caterers, and event planners should include indigenous dishes in menus and improve their presentation, packaging, hygiene, and service quality.
3. Universities and research institutions should document traditional recipes, preparation techniques, food meanings, regional variations, and food histories before they disappear.
4. Media organisations, food influencers, and cultural content creators should promote indigenous foods through documentaries, cooking shows, food photography, interviews, and digital storytelling.
5. Youth engagement programmes should teach traditional cooking skills and explain the cultural, nutritional, and economic value of indigenous foods.
6. Public-private partnerships should support indigenous food entrepreneurship, branding, processing, packaging, distribution, and export potential.
7. Tourism boards should integrate indigenous food experiences into festival planning, cultural tours, destination marketing, and hospitality training.

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