

# Bridging the Past and Present: A Qualitative Exploration of Culinary Students' Engagement with *Dodol* as Cultural Heritage

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## ABSTRACT

This pilot qualitative study aims to investigate the knowledge, attitude and perception of first-semester culinary students of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Pulau Pinang towards *dodol*, a traditional Malaysian food of great value. Although this food is very significant, it is ironic that its authenticity and preservation are seriously challenged. Younger generation not being aware of its preparation and the lack of research on traditional foods. The purpose of this study is to explore students' knowledge of *dodol*, their views on traditional food and the factors causing its decline. Semi-structured interviews were held with 15 culinary students to achieve this; their data were thematically analysed. The results showed that most students only had a little knowledge about *dodol* and showed mixed feelings toward traditional food, with some expressing a nostalgic appreciation of *dodol* as a part of their heritage, while others felt that *dodol* is outdated. These differences in opinion highlight a disconnection between tradition and modern culinary trends. Along with that, institutional issues are made clear by the study. Culinary programmes are unable to represent traditional foods in the curriculum. Moreover, there are time restrictions on academic programmes. Considering these findings, the study highlights the necessity for the infusion of a traditional food module in culinary training and creating an association with local food makers to provide hands-on experience to students. Enhancing the links between schools and cultural communities may improve the understanding of traditional foods and their sustainability against globalisation. This study illustrates how culinary education can connect generations in Malaysia and help pass on Malaysia's food heritage to future generations.

**Keywords:** *dodol*; culinary students; cultural preservation; culinary education; traditional foods

## INTRODUCTION

*Dodol* is a traditional food in Malaysia that represents the country's multicultural heritage and long-standing culinary traditions. It is made from coconut milk, rice flour, and palm sugar. This sticky, chewy and toffee-like confection is usually served during festive seasons like *Hari Raya* (Abdul Rahman et al., 2020). Besides being a festive delicacy, *dodol* exhibits a historical and cultural part of Malaysia's agricultural products and traditional cooking methods (Abdul Rahman et al., 2020).

Prior studies have documented how modernisation and globalisation have shifted Malaysian youth's dietary preferences toward Western and convenience foods, relegating traditional dishes like *dodol* to an outdated status. However, these studies predominantly focus on general populations, leaving a critical gap in understanding how future culinary professionals students tasked with preserving Malaysia's gastronomic heritage, perceive traditional foods. This study addresses this gap by investigating culinary students' awareness and attitudes toward *dodol*, positioning them as pivotal actors in bridging generational and institutional divides (Mohd Zahari et al., 2021; Ismail et al., 2022).

Due to this, the concern arises that traditional foods like *dodol* may become obsolete in the future. Making *dodol* is quite tedious as it requires continuous stirring for several hours over low heat. More and more it is contrary to what today's young generation wants which is to eat. Many younger Malaysians, especially culinary students, who are seen as the future guardians of Malaysian food heritage, do not know the history, preparation, and significance of *dodol*. The limited exposure to traditional foods in culinary education, which is more focused on modern and international cuisines (Ismail et al., 2022; Sulaiman et al., 2023), may have caused this unawareness. As a result, *dodol* and other traditional meals could be forgotten if no active measures are taken to conserve them.

In light of these issues, the focus of this study is the knowledge of *dodol* by culinary students, the students attitudes towards traditional foods, and its problems. Culinary students will always be a vital player in various food trends and culinary practices, thus, their opinions will be valuable in looking into the current status of traditional food knowledge. If even the culinary students themselves aren't knowledgeable or appreciative of traditional foods, how will the future sustainability of Malaysia's culinary heritage be ensured? This study aims to find out whether students are aware of *dodol* as an important Malaysian traditional food and whether it is still relevant today. To reach the aims of this study, three main research questions will be addressed.

- (i) What do culinary students know about *dodol*'s preparation and its cultural significance? The goal of this question is to measure what the culinary students know about the ingredients, cooking process, and history of *dodol*.
- (ii) How do the students see traditional foods like *dodol* today? This will help in finding whether they think such foods are still in trend or have outlived their existence.
- (iii) What are the key challenges faced by young culinary students in learning, appreciating, and preserving traditional foods like *dodol*? Figuring out these problems will identify the barriers to preserving traditional food. Are these problems because of people's attitudes? Or problems with education? Or problems with complex methods of making traditional foods?

Basically, the objective of the qualitative pilot study is to investigate the unanswered questions. How can the food industry combat the gap between the younger generations and the older generations? This study's findings will identify institutional and societal barriers to knowledge transmission that can inform educational policy and curriculum design relevant to the preservation of Malaysia's food heritage. The study also stresses that culinary instruction ought to provide more significant space for cultural food knowledge so that the future generation of chefs and food practitioners will learn the importance of cultural foods like *dodol*. By uncovering these issues, this study seeks to instill a greater appreciation for traditional foods and ensure their ongoing relevance in Malaysia's changing food scene.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Dodol: A traditional Malay delicacy**

*Dodol* is a classic Malay sweet associated with Malaysia's multi-racial society. *Dodol* is made from coconut milk, rice flour and palm sugar and is cooked for 8–12 hours over wood-fired or gas stoves until it has a thick, caramelised texture (Abdul Rahman et al., 2020). In the past, it was prepared together during events like *Hari Raya*, weddings, and harvest festivals, signalling togetherness

among Malays, Indians, and *Peranakan* in the same community. *Dodol* has regional variations due to the uniqueness of Malaysia. For example, Penang's version is infused with durian, while Malacca's *dodol* uses *gula Melaka*. Different types like Kedah sticky rice *dodol* and Sarawak pineapple *dodol* prove how flexible *dodol* is with local ingredients and tastes (Mohd Zahari et al., 2021).



Figure 1. The traditional dodol making process uses human power, gas stove and traditional cooking equipment.

Abdul Rahman et al. (2020) and Ismail et al. (2022) have extensively documented dodols historical preparation methods, emphasising its communal and cultural significance. However, their work primarily examines rural practices and generational transmission within families, overlooking the role of formal culinary education in sustaining such traditions. By contrast, this study interrogates how institutional frameworks specifically culinary curricula shape student's engagement with dodol, a dimension underexplored in existing literature (Sulaiman et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, *dodol*'s survival is precarious. Making *dodol* is a time-consuming process. Nowadays everybody is busy and preparing dodol is considered 'old-fashioned' by the young people (Mohd Zahari et al., 2021). As elderly artisans are unable to find apprentices who are willing to learn how to make the *dodol*, handmade *dodol* is declining. Mass-produced dodol uses preservatives, artificial flavourings, etc., to meet market demands, further diminishing the authenticity of dodol (Sulaiman et al. 2023).

### Cultural significance of traditional foods

*Dodol*, are more than food, they are the carriers of cultural memory and identity. In Malaysia, *dodols* connection to *Hari Raya* communal feasting demonstrates the dish's role in sustaining social bonding and inter-generational continuity. The anthropologist Sidney Mintz (1996) states that food is a 'cultural code' with meanings conveyed through taste and ritual. *Dodol* is a food that symbolises Malaysia's rural past and multicultural present that we can eat.

The dish's symbolic resonance extends to hospitality. *Dodol* is offered to guest at festival times to show respect and generosity. This is noted in the ethnography of villages (Ismail et al., 2022). *Peranakan* people offer *dodol* during ancestral worship, making it godly food (Tan, 2018). These practices show how food connects the sacred with the profane, bringing stories to life.

However, globalisation has disrupted these narratives. Batat (2021) points to the homogenising impact of Western fast food and digital living on Southeast Asia's foodways. Malaysian urban youth tend to like convenience food and apparently view *dodol* as a less modern food item that does not promote efficiency (Mohd Zahari et al., 2021). This change in trend is occurring in Thailand and Indonesia, too, where street food and instant food dominate traditional recipes (Tran & Nguyen, 2022). Yet, traditional foods remain vital to national identity. UNESCO has declared the Japanese *washoku* and the Mexican culinary practices have been labelled and qualified as Intangible Cultural Heritage. As such, they can serve as barriers against cultural erosion (Batat, 2021). Malaysia's act of safeguarding *dodol* is not merely culinary but a form of cultural sovereignty.

### **Skill transmission in traditional food practices**

Passing skills down from generation to generation enables the preservation of food heritage, particularly for practices that are learnt hand-in-hand and face-to-face. Unlike recipes in written form, much traditional culinary skill is acquired through embodied learning, that is, observation, imitation, and verbal instruction within a familial or communal context (Jones 2007). Malaysian traditional foods like *dodol* are one of the foods that teach knowledge to younger generations, as the elders prepare them during the festivals (Abdullah, 2019). Due to the rising urbanisation and an ever-changing lifestyle, this informal learning system is deteriorating. Students are not given the opportunity to learn local heritage food skills as modern education systems are influenced by the West to learn culinary skills (Ismail & Idris, 2020; Khoo, 2010).

Culinary programmes generally lack modules on traditional cuisine (Tan et al., 2022). This has made heritage foods less desirable and weakened skill transfer. Nor (2015) also argues that cooking *dodol* entails stirred continuously over the heat for a few hours, which is very time-consuming. Moreover, younger generations are familiar with a faster pace of life. So, the secret knowledge of older people could disappear as elders die or leave the community unless other approaches are put in place such as school programmes on heritage food or community apprenticeships (Bessière, 1998; UNESCO, 2020).

### **Challenges in preservation**

The knowledge of traditional food is declining due to sociocultural, economic and institutional. One of the biggest challenges is how the young people in town no longer connect with the rural foods. In 2021, 78% of Malaysian culinary students could easily name the ingredients of the European dessert *creme brulee* but they could not name the basic ingredients of *dodol* (Abdul Rahman et al., 2020). A memory gap prevents the passing down of oral traditions and indigenous food knowledge to younger urban generations who are immersed in digitally and globally constructed food cultures.

Another reason why *dodol* would become less popular is the amount of time and work needed to prepare it. Traditional *dodol* needs to be stirred continuously at low heat for several hours. Clearly, this is impossible for one who lives a fast-paced life. Dishes that are labour-intensive are being rejected in favour of ready-to-eat or instant foods as more and more consumers around the world prefer convenience. This is not unique to Malaysia. Numerous studies have found that 73% of Millennial's around the world are happy to sacrifice authenticity for convenience, often consuming pre-prepared foods instead of traditional recipes despite them being more meaningful to them (Chaturvedi et al., 2022; IFIC, 2023). For example, Gupta et al. (2023) found that 68% of urban populations in Southeast Asia rarely make legacy recipes as it requires too much time, and opt for processed foods instead. Clearly, many heritage foods like *dodol* are at risk of becoming extinct as consumers increasingly favour efficiency over authenticity (Smith & Lee, 2023).

Malaysia's culinary training system complicates the problem more. Many culinary courses are primarily based on Western cuisines, with emphasis on French and Italian culinary techniques. Local food heritage is neglected. As per Sulaiman et al. (2023), the culinary syllabus in Malaysia has less than 5% devoted to traditional Malay food, whereas European dishes are nearly 40% of the syllabus. This could indicate a systematic belief that local foods are not 'refined' enough or not fit for the business (Abdul Rahman et al., 2020). As a consequence, graduates will not have enough knowledge of Malaysia's rich food heritage to use local cuisine (*dodol*) in their practice.

Economic constraints too play a major role in the reducing production of *dodol*. Artisan *dodol* producers lack the resources and distribution networks to compete against mass-produced *dodol* (Chooi, 2022). Small halal *dodol* workshops cannot afford the marketing capabilities and economies of scale enjoyed by large food companies, leading to the gradual demise of handmade *dodol* (Mohd Zahari et al., 2021). If not, the authentic *dodol* could be shadowed by the industrialised version which is more efficient but not as culturally significant (UNESCO, 2021; Batat, 2021).

All these factors have contributed to the diminishing status of '*dodol*' as heritage food. If there are no substantial interventions in education, industry, and consumer education, this traditional delicacy may soon lose its significance in Malaysia, leading future generations to miss out on its history and culture.

### Role of culinary education

Culinary education is pivotal in reversing these trends. Incorporating modules on traditional food into the curriculum would increase appreciation and skills transfer. Thailand's plan for Gastro Diplomacy is a useful model. Thailand managed to revive its heritage through the incorporation of regional dishes such as *Som Tum* in tourism and culinary programmes (Batat, 2021). Japan's Washoku curriculum has been part of culinary schools since 2013, forwarding practices like dashi making (Cristóbal-Lobatón, 2023). Malaysia can enhance student interest by introducing modules on the history, preparation and cultural meaning of *dodol*. Collaborations with traditional craftsmen, such as Penang's Heritage Trust, could engage students in practicals with theoretical learnings (Khoo & Badarulzaman, 2014).

Locating *dodol* within global sustainability trends helps it to have relevance. Highlighting the utilisation of local elements (for instance, gula Melaka) and minimum waste provision ties in with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Chaturvedi et al, 2022). For example, the "Zero-Km Food" movement from Italy promotes sourcing food hyper-locally and is believed to have revived some regional foods while lowering carbon footprints (Batat, 2021).

Encouragement by accreditation organizations to apply heritage content can institutionalize changes. The UNESCO programmes in Mexico that served traditional cooking content in the school syllabus led to a 30% increase in registration for the indigenous cooking course (UNESCO, 2021). Likewise, Malaysia can utilize both culinary schools and the Ministry of Tourism to develop a certificate programme that prioritises *dodol* and similar other traditional foods. This would use the UNESCO framework to safeguard intangible heritage (Abdul Rahman et al., 2023). Such efforts would not just preserve traditional cuisine but also mark the resurgent expression of cultural sovereignty in the face of globalization (Ismail & Sulaiman, 2022).

Using the story-telling medium on social media as a platform to give *dodol* a "hip" heritage food image. South Korea has shown recognition of their kimchi, which is presented as a burger and taco. In the same way, it is also cultural preservation through a digital platform (Batat, 2021). Culinary students can partner with influencers to make TikTok tutorials or Instagram reels showing *dodol*'s versatility to different generations.

### Preservation of authentic foods and cultural identity

Traditional foods carry with them a wealth of history and culture that connects us and evokes emotion. As one of the enduring heritage foods of Malaysia, *dodol* illustrates the detailed association between food and identity. Some scholars claim that the conservation of these products allows the community to maintain their cultural continuity (Bessière, 1998; UNESCO, 2020). Many



traditional foods are handed down through generations in traditional societies as they sense of belonging and ties to their families and cultures (Guerrero et al., 2009).

However, authentic food preservation is becoming increasingly difficult. Modern day globalisation, urbanisation and the introduction of convenience foods have changed food preferences, especially among the youth (Teng et al., 2019). Food preparation was done using traditional methods that may be time-consuming and labor intensive. Today's youth can consider it irrelevant (Wilhelmina et al., 2019). As a result, foods such as dodol will become a symbol rather than an actual food.

The literature highlights a critical issue, that the younger generation is losing interest in learning or continuing traditional cooking practices (Tan et al., 2015; Abdul Latif et al., 2022). The problem is worsened by the lack of proper documentation, insufficient exposure in formal education, and the global dominance of Westernised food cultures in radio, television, and advertising (Omar et al., 2021).

To address these issues, it is essential to educate people about cultural food heritage through initiatives. One of these initiatives is integrating traditional food heritage into culinary education curriculum as explored in this study (Norhasnida et al., 2020). Experiential learning and storytelling programmes can reposition traditional foods as an evolving cultural heritage, rather than a relic of the past that young Malaysians can take ownership of and sustain.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study will use a qualitative phenomenological approach to find culinary students' lived experience, perception and attitude toward *dodol*. Phenomenology would be most appropriate for this research, which focuses on the subjective meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since the study focuses on how students understand and interact with traditional foods such as *dodol*, which is closely linked to cultural identity (ethnic origin) and generational transmission (ethnic bond), the exploratory approach allows for in-depth insights and understanding. This includes their awareness, emotional connections with *dodol*, and institutional challenges. Focusing on the participants' stories, phenomenology aligns with the purpose of the study, which is to uncover how culinary education influences their relationship with heritage foods.

### Sampling and Participants

This study used purposive sampling to sample first semester culinary students at UiTM Pulau Pinang. The participants chosen in this study represent those who are just beginning their formal culinary education. So, their knowledge and prejudices about traditional foods have not been influenced yet by the institution's curriculum. Their perspectives therefore offer a starting point to evaluate gaps in pre-existing knowledge and generational transmission of food heritage (Neuman 2014). As newcomers to the kitchen, the views of these participants provide a key baseline from which to investigate gaps in prior knowledge and the efficacy of generational transmission of food heritage (Lee & Kim, 2021). The uninfluenced opinions of participants present a useful framework to evaluate how culinary curriculum may have helped or hindered disconnections in cultural preservation (Thompson et al., 2022).

Fifteen participants were purposely selected based on diversity of regional background to capture diverse exposures to traditional foods like *dodol*. Collaborating with programmes faculty administrators to identify eligible students for recruitment.

- (i) Enrolled in their first semester of the culinary program.
- (ii) No prior formal training in traditional Malaysian cuisine.
- (iii) Willingness to participate in semi-structured interviews.

The data collection process continued until thematic saturation was reached and no new themes emerged from new interviews (Guest et al. 2006). This ensured the sample size was sufficient to capture diverse perspectives while maintaining methodological rigour.

### Data collection

We used semi-structured interviews to carefully balance structure and flexibility. This allowed participants to explain their experiences with the interview as researchers ensured their experiences aligned with the research questions. Depending on participant availability, we conducted 30–45 minutes interviews in person or online. Key questions included.

- (i) What do you know about the history and preparation of *dodol*?
- (ii) What do you think about the relevance of traditional foods such as *dodol* in modern-day cuisine?
- (iii) What challenges do you foresee in preserving *dodol* for future generations?

Participants shared their personal stories, memories related to culture and critique in response to the open-ended questions. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymize.

### Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is a recognised method for phenomenological research that identifies themes while preserving the voice of the participant. The process involved.

- (i) Immersion: Repeated reading of transcripts to familiarize researchers with the data.
- (ii) Coding: Generating initial codes (generational disconnect, nostalgic attachment) to categorize key ideas.
- (iii) Theme Development: Grouping codes into broader themes (Cultural Connection, Skills Transmission, Challenges in Preservation, Cultural Awareness).
- (iv) Review and Refinement: Iteratively revising themes to ensure coherence and relevance to research questions.

### Ethical considerations

In accordance with the accepted qualitative research guidelines, this research ensured voluntary participation, confidentiality and informed consent of the participants. The study was fully explained to the participants, including the purpose, the procedure, and their rights such as the right to withdraw anytime. All study participants gave either written or verbal informed consent before their interviews. To ensure participant anonymity, all transcripts were anonymised (P1, P2, etc). The pilot study was not submitted for formal ethics board approval, but the researchers followed ethical protocols for qualitative research designed by Creswell and Poth (2018) and ensured the welfare of participants throughout the process.

## RESULTS

### Theme 1: Cultural connection

Thematic analysis reveals several patterns related to cultural identity, emotional memory, and nostalgia. Culinary students showed a general lack of understanding about *dodol*, often viewing it solely as a festive treat rather than a cultural artefact. Participants perceived that *dodol* was merely a festive delicacy served during the Hari Raya. Participant 3 shared, “I eat it during the Hari Raya Open House but don’t know how it is made. This suggests that there is a disconnect between consuming traditional food and the knowledge of its roots. Nine of the participants revealed an emotional response to this dish, often talking about their childhood and family memories. For instance, P7 said, “My grandfather makes it each year; it brings me back to my childhood.” These

reflections suggest that *dodol* is more than a sweet; it is a symbol of familial bonds and heritage. The findings of Abdullah (2019) and Bessi re (1998) support this claim. It has been shown that traditional food can anchor the identity and memory of a group.

## Theme 2: Skill transmission

Only a few participants showed any familiarity with the actual ingredients or traditional preparation methods of *dodol*. Many confused handmade *dodol* with the commercial, store-bought version, and only two participants could name the key ingredients, such as coconut milk, rice flour, and palm sugar. This indicates a serious erosion in intergenerational skill transfer. Knowledge that was once passed down informally through family rituals or community elders is no longer being actively shared or practiced. Participant 11 (P11) reflected, "Even if I wanted to learn, I don't have the time or mentorship," underscoring the gap between intent and opportunity. This is in line with the findings of Bessi re (1998) who stated that knowledge about food is transmitted mainly through informal networks (families, locality, etc.). However, the weakening of these networks, especially in urban and educational contexts, has significantly diminished opportunities for such knowledge transfer.

Participants also highlighted a lack of mentorship and structured platforms to develop traditional culinary skills. The absence of hands-on opportunities such as watching, doing, and sharing, suggests that the traditional mode of skills transmission has weakened in a modern educational setting. Menezes et al. (2020) similarly argue that modern culinary institutions often prioritise global and Western food trends over local heritage, reducing opportunities for students to learn traditional techniques. Furthermore, Amilien and Hegnes (2010) observe that without practical engagement and guided learning, traditional food practices are likely to fade from everyday knowledge. This study showed that making *dodol* is also restricted in its implementation because of modernisation and lack of time as well as the curriculum.

## Theme 3: Challenges in preservation

Preserving *dodol* faces multiple obstacles. Students expressed concern that their formal culinary education prioritises European techniques such as French patisserie or Italian cuisine, while neglecting local food heritage. One of the participants mentioned, 'We learn how to pipe perfect choux but not to stir *dodol*' which shows the impression that traditional foods are not prestigious and relevant to professional success. The observation made by Zubaidah and Ishak (2021) highlights that the Malaysian culinary curriculum has sidelined local cuisines and food, favouring international food that is widely promoted, thus resulting in the loss of food heritage since young.

Time constraint was another major issue. Three in four students (73%) reported that their commitments to academic work, part-time jobs, and social obligations left them with no time to explore traditional food-making outside the classroom. P14 added, "Who has time to stir a '*kuali/kawah*' for hours? This means that the time-consuming process of making *dodol* does not help customers since they are used to the fast-paced modern lifestyle. As Bessi re (1998) notes, traditional food practices often require significant time and community effort, which are difficult to maintain in contemporary settings. Traditional activities such as *dodol*-making are regarded as antique and not practical without the help of dedicated modules or the community artisans. Long (2004) argued for similar findings as this, that a culinary heritage can live on only with institutional supports or conscious efforts to make its way into the modern world that range from education itself to public issues.

## Theme 4: Cultural awareness

Participants were divided into two groups. While one group nostalgically expressed their personal connection with *dodol*, the other group marked it irrelevant. P12 questioned, "What's the point of learning *dodol*? This reflects how modern food trends shape culinary perceptions, cupcake and kunafa are the trend. A big number of participants enjoyed Western or Middle Eastern desserts as they are "Instagrammable". They find *dodol* not appealing and not modern.



These preferences are amplified by digital and social media platforms. Younger generations are choosing visually attractive and international dishes over traditional ones (Marotta et al., 2021). To cite an example, Nguyen & Santos (2023) reveal that TikTok and Instagram have made cultural legitimacy contingent on trendiness and shareability, rather than heritage value. This change points to a generation gap in consuming values, jeopardising the legacy of traditional foods (Lee & Kim, 2021). Broader challenges in terms of cultural awareness are creating a situation where respective food identities are becoming globalised and affected (Thompson et al., 2022).

## DISCUSSION

Results of this study are consistent with Mohd Zahari et al. (2021) and Sulaiman et al. (2023), this study identifies institutional neglect and generational disconnect as key barriers to preserving *dodol*. However, while prior research attributes decline to broad sociocultural shifts (Batat, 2021; Gupta et al., 2023), our findings uniquely highlight how culinary education's exacerbates these challenges. By excluding traditional foods like *dodol* from the syllabus, institutions inadvertently validate students' perceptions of irrelevance, a phenomenon absent in studies focused on household transmission (Abdul Rahman et al., 2020).

### Knowledge gaps

Students disjointed knowledge about *dodol*, its history, how to prepare it, and its cultural significance reflects a broader decline in how food knowledge is passed down from one generation to another. Nowadays, the younger generation views traditional foods as old foods as noted by Ismail et al. (2022). Because *dodol* is absent from formal culinary curricula, it is seen as detached. Malaysian culinary institutions spend less than 5% of their syllabus on local heritage foods, Sulaiman et al. (2023) found, compared to 40% that European cuisines received. This absence of *dodol* in the culinary course syllabus meant that after graduation, students would likely not have knowledge or familiarity with any indigenous ingredient or technique.

### Attitudinal divides

The contradiction between nostalgia and modernity observed among participants reflects a trend towards convenience and globalisation. Although some students feel nostalgic towards *dodol*, saying that it symbolises their cultural identity as well as familial connections (For instance, "It reminds me of my grandmother's kitchen" – P9), a few think it is not relevant for modern lifestyles. As a matter of fact, one even dismisses its relevance, saying that, "Who has time to stir a '*kuali / kawah*' for hours?" – P14). The world is seeing a festival of traditional foods being romanticised but not valued (Batat, 2021). Batat (2021) findings on foodscapes of the Middle East reveal a similar tension where younger generations were able to praise traditional dishes while simultaneously opting for fast food. Students view *dodol* as irrelevant as they prefer Western / International desserts like cupcakes, *kunafa* or macaroon which are Instagrammable and popular global culinary trends.

### Institutional barriers (preservation)

Exclusion of traditional food from culinary curriculum also reflects on the institution's persistent bias towards Western cuisine. As Abdul Rahman et al. (2020) mention, the pedagogical practice of Malaysia is that "culinary excellence" is seen as mastery over French/Italian techniques and local traditions are misrepresented. Accreditation standards and industry collaborations actively reinforce this bias through their focus on international hotel chains, not local eateries. Also, the structure of time limitations which 73% of the participants reported indicates that participants meet the academic load, work and social commitments. Students are unable to engage in practices like *dodol* making due to these constraints, as it requires much effort, time, and mentorship (Ismail et al., 2022).

## CONCLUSIONS

This research reveals three important things about what culinary students know and believe about *dodol* as well as the institutional obstacles to its preservation. This study extends prior work on traditional food preservation (UNESCO, 2021; Ismail et al., 2022) by centring culinary students future custodians of Malaysia's food heritage as critical stakeholders. Unlike broader analyses of globalisation's impact (Batat, 2021), our findings reveal how institutional curricula and time constraints uniquely alienate students from traditional practices. These insights underscore the urgency of curriculum reforms to align with global efforts like Thailand's Gastro Diplomacy (Batat, 2021) and Japan's *Washoku* education (Cristóbal-Lobatón, 2023), which this study adapts to the Malaysian context.

The research findings show that culinary students usually have little knowledge of the history and culture of *dodol*. Most students do not know how it is made, what the ingredients are and its role in Malaysian culinary heritage. The ignorance shows us the generational decline of food knowledge. Also, most of it has been compensated for by modern and international cuisine in current culinary education. If there are no deliberate efforts in the incorporation of traditional foods in culinary schooling, future generations would lose touch with the food heritage of Malaysia.

Moreover, students have mixed feelings towards *dodol*, either feeling nostalgic or finding it tacky. Some students consider *dodol* a nostalgic dessert closely tied to family bonding experiences, while others criticise its inclusion in modern menus. Most students understand its significance, but they don't have the skills or the chance to prepare for it. *Dodol* is seen as an outdated food by a more pragmatic group who considers it impractical for the present times. Students feel that modern desserts that we have been eating like cheesecakes, smoothies, tiramisu, etc. are the best as it gives them good marks. The difference tells us that without the help of those with nostalgic memories, traditional foods become harder to sustain.

Also, the research indicates institutional barriers that limit meaningful engagement with traditional foods like *dodol*. The current food curriculum focuses mainly on Western and modern foods, with limited attention given to local heritage foods. Because of this, the students rarely get the opportunity to learn about traditional methods of preparation. Also, the academic workload and time constraints of culinary students do not allow many opportunities for hands-on learning of traditional food. If we do not take any structured approaches, then the decline of traditional food knowledge is likely to continue. It helps the education system to the latter.

## Implications for practice

Some measures are recommended to combat these challenges. Most definitely, the inclusion of a module on Malaysia's traditional foods into the culinary curriculum would alert students to such aspect. *The module must have practical workshop sessions with local artisans in Penang, as well as dodol makers, allowing students to gain experience in the preparation.* The Malaysian Chef Association and similar organisation may organise food fests / competitions on traditional foods for the students. The purpose of these events is to give the students an opportunity to work with *dodol* as well as create public awareness about traditional food. Lastly, it is important to advocate policies that allow for the accessibility of traditional foods. Culinary accreditation bodies must ensure that the syllabus includes local heritage content, as much as possible and must balance between Malaysian and Western food. If we do all these things, it will bridge the gap in knowledge for future generations of chefs and food professionals.

## Recommendations for further research

Future research could examine social media as a tool to rebrand *dodol* for young people and increase its consumption. Sites like TikTok and YouTube can potentially be on the menu for boosting food trends and reviving interest in *dodol*. Researching how *dodol* can be marketed with fun digital content, recipes to go viral, and storytelling videos may reveal how digital media can bridge generational knowledge gaps. This study could help examine how effective social media

campaigns help in enhancing *dodol* awareness, appreciation, and consumption, especially among the youth who tend to engage more with social media. Also, long-term studies on the benefits of including traditional food knowledge in formal culinary programmes should be done. To assess the effectiveness of the proposed curriculum change to include the traditional food *dodol*, a study should be done to check the students engagement and learning and their practical application over a period of five to ten years. These studies would provide proof whether the educational work can ensure a lasting desire for Malaysia's culinary heritage. Learning how the attitudes and skill sets of students change after being educated on traditional food will help better the teaching and enhance the curriculum.

Another key area for future investigation is how knowledge is handed down in families. Traditional food practices are passed on informally within families, often through grandparents who are largely responsible for these practices being passing on. The process of transmission of knowledge about *dodol* within the family and the challenges faced in doing so may hold the key to the sustainability of traditional food culture. Studies should be conducted to determine whether all or only the younger members of each family do not perform this learning process anymore.

Future studies could provide a better insight into strategies to enable *dodol* to survive as a cultural heritage food by filling these research gaps. Through online engagement, structured education and passing on knowledge from the old to the young, we can ensure *dodol* lives on. To maintain *dodol* and other ethnic foods as part of Malaysia's identity, reinforcement of the institutions and the need for the community is to be responsive is necessary.

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## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The research was conducted independently, and no financial or personal relationships influenced the outcomes or interpretations presented.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed equally to the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and writing this paper. Each author reviewed and approved the final manuscript for submission.

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