

OPINION  
GUEST ESSAY

# Food Tourism Is Dead. But Something More Interesting Is Emerging.

Dec. 31, 2024, 1:00 a.m. ET



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**By Brian Lee**

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I eagerly awaited my reservation last year at Rekondo in San Sebastián, Spain — another predictable, if excellent, stop on the well-worn food tourist circuit. At my table, I lost myself in a wine list thick as a phone book, each page heavy with forgotten Riojas, until the pristine hake kokotxas arrived.

I was on a two-week family vacation on the Iberian Peninsula. But what I didn't expect was that my most memorable meal on the trip would come at Chila, a Hunanese restaurant in Madrid, where I could order chef's specials through WeChat. As I savored premium Ibérico pork loin with fiery Padrón peppers and fermented black beans, watching Chinese families chat at nearby tables, I realized something fundamental had shifted in how we experience food through travel.

We can now observe food cultures develop in real time, shaped by migration and internet connectivity. The old model of chasing cultural cachet by traveling to specific destinations for "authentic" local cuisine is fading fast, worn down by streaming food documentaries, algorithm-driven Instagram recommendations that expose every hidden gem and the democratization of travel through budget flights and Airbnbs. With global foods more accessible than ever, the real cutting edge of culinary exploration lies not in destination traveling, but in the next wave of "third culture" cuisines at the intersections of tradition, immigration and diaspora.

Food tourism as we've known it has become a victim of its own success. You no longer need to visit Paris for macarons from Ladurée when you can find them at shops in major U.S. cities or have them delivered to your home via Goldbelly, a service that specializes in iconic restaurant dishes and regional specialties. Even Tokyo's Tsukiji market experience has gone global: The chefs at Masa in New York and Sushi Zo in Los Angeles have told me that the same fish being auctioned in the famous bazaar arrives daily in their restaurants.

The obscure treasures in back alleys are now bookmarked on TikTok, with Uber dropping tourists at their doorstep. Patrons study menus before going to restaurants, they know the chef's story, they arrive at already rated "secret" spots through geo-tagging.

But here's where it gets interesting: What we're witnessing isn't just the decline of traditional food tourism — it's the birth of something far more fascinating.

Take Chila in Madrid. The storefront could have been plucked straight from Hunan's spice-loving heartland. It serves as both a cultural lifeline for Chinese expatriates in Spain, and as an introduction to regional Chinese cooking for curious madrileños. Diners there can wash down their meals with sangria or baijiu from Guizhou — a perfect blend of Spanish and Chinese drinking traditions.

Or consider a staple of German cuisine. You don't need to travel to Germany for Oktoberfest and bratwurst anymore; you can get that in Cincinnati at the giant Zinzinnati festival or at the Wurstfest in New Braunfels, Texas. But what you will find in Germany is how the culinary landscape has been transformed by the nearly [three million Turks](#) (both immigrants and members of the diaspora) that have been developing their own food identity there since the [1960s](#).

In Lima, [chifa](#) (Chinese-Peruvian) and Nikkei (Japanese-Peruvian) dishes are redefining Peruvian cuisine to reflect a 150-year history of Asian immigration. While tourists flock to the latest New Nordic hot spots in Copenhagen, there's an emerging African diaspora cuisine in Stockholm, where restaurants like Jebena serve injera. These immigrant-owned establishments are quietly reshaping Nordic cuisine in ways that could make Noma — the revolutionary restaurant in Denmark that put foraging and fermentation at the heart of fine dining — seem traditional.

In Toronto, West Indian-inspired innovations are producing completely new flavor profiles. In London, Nigerian suya — the spicy, skewered street meat known for its distinct blend of ground peanuts and spices — is being reimaged in ways that could influence the next generation of British cuisine.

New York offers a clear window into this phenomenon. The city now has a network of international food markets offering immediate access to world-class ingredients and authentic dishes — such as the finest Ibérico ham at Mercado, fresh pasta at Eataly, a selection of premium gochugaru at H-Mart markets and the vast Indian grocery at Patel Brothers in Jackson Heights.

What was once celebrated as a mosaic of distinct ethnic enclaves has become a laboratory for the future of global cuisine. Yes, you can still line up at Katz's Deli or grab a bagel at Russ & Daughters, but the real culinary excitement is happening in places like Tatiana and Dept of Culture, where chefs with West African roots are reimagining their cuisine through a fine-dining lens. These

aren't just fusion restaurants or immigrant adaptations — they're entirely new cultural expressions.

One exciting aspect of this evolution is that it's impossible to experience it through delivery apps or social media. You can't truly understand how immigrant communities are reshaping French identity without walking through Paris's 13th Arrondissement, home to the city's Chinatown and a large Asian community. You can't grasp Singapore's culinary innovation by ordering from a ghost kitchen. The most innovative Italian dish might come from a chef in Tokyo who never set foot in Italy but understands the essence of the cuisine through a global lens. A pop-up in Toronto might be defining the future of Mexican street food by incorporating techniques and ingredients that would be unthinkable in Oaxaca.

The world's next great cuisine isn't hidden in some undiscovered corner of the globe. It's being created right now, in the spaces where cultures, traditions and technologies mingle. That's where the real food adventure begins.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/31/opinion/food-tourism-travel-instagram-tiktok.html?login=email&auth=login-email>

Wouldn't it be a delight to be an excellent chef and master one kind of cuisine after another, maybe inventing new ones along the way? I wonder how "the ways of the world" and the legion of narcissistic "master chefs" (to whom you would have to submit to learn the trade) could ruin this ambition too. TJB