

Traditional Food Local Stories and Tourism Exploring Participants Experiences and Perceptions of Food Walks in Pune.

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ABSTRACT

Pune is hailed as one of the prominent and emerging culinary tourism destinations in India. Pune is a city where traditional Maharashtrian cuisine, local history, and cultural narratives come together to create a very engaging and enriching visitor experiences. Nowadays, food walks have gained a lot of popularity by providing opportunities to the participants to explore authentic local food along with discovering the heritage of Pune its, traditions, and numerous stories associated with Pune. This study, "**Traditional Food, Local Stories and Tourism: Exploring Participants' Experiences and Perceptions of Food Walks in Pune,**" investigates participants' experiences their perceptions of food walks and contribution of food walks to culinary tourism in Pune city. The research is based on both secondary and primary data. Secondary data include a review of existing literature and an analysis of online customer reviews of food walks to identify recurring themes related to authenticity, storytelling, cultural immersion, service quality, and visitor satisfaction. Primary data were collected from **182 participants** using a structured questionnaire. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations. The findings indicate that authentic traditional cuisine, engaging storytelling, and cultural interpretation significantly enhance visitor experiences and satisfaction. Participants generally perceived food walks as offering good value for money and recognised them as an effective medium for promoting Pune's culinary heritage and local businesses. The study concludes that food walks represent a sustainable experiential tourism product with significant potential to strengthen Pune's identity as a leading culinary tourism destination while preserving its traditional food culture and local stories.

Keywords: Culinary Tourism, Food Walks, Pune, Traditional Food, Tourist Experience

INTRODUCTION

Food is an important part of a destination's culture, history, and identity. Every region has its own unique cuisine, influenced by local traditions, geography, and lifestyle (Hall & Sharples, 2003). In recent years, tourists have increasingly sought authentic food experiences as part of their travel, leading to the growth of culinary tourism, where local food becomes an important motivation for visiting a destination rather than merely fulfilling a basic need (Ellis et al., 2018).

The World Food Travel Association (2024) defines food tourism as travelling to experience the unique food, beverages, and culinary culture of a destination. Similarly, UN Tourism describes gastronomy tourism as a form of cultural tourism that allows visitors to experience local cuisine, traditions, and heritage (UNWTO, 2019). Besides providing memorable experiences, culinary tourism supports local businesses, preserves traditional recipes, and contributes to sustainable tourism development (Richards, 2021).

One of the fastest-growing forms of culinary tourism is the food walk. A food walk is a guided experience where participants visit local eateries, taste authentic dishes, and learn about the history, culture, and stories associated with the destination (Hall & Sharples, 2003). Unlike conventional dining, food walks combine food with storytelling and interaction with local communities, making the experience more engaging and memorable (Ellis et al., 2018).

Recent studies have further highlighted the importance of storytelling in food tourism. Martins et al. (2023) explained that storytelling transforms food tourism into an immersive cultural experience by connecting visitors with local traditions, people, and history. Likewise, Jongsuksomsakul (2024) found that culinary storytelling enhances visitors' understanding of local culture, improves authenticity, and contributes to overall satisfaction. These studies suggest that food walks are not only about tasting food but also about preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of a destination.

Pune, often known as the cultural capital of Maharashtra, has a rich culinary heritage shaped by its history and traditions. Iconic dishes such as Misal Pav, Mastani, Bhakarwadi, Sabudana Khichdi, Puneri Dosa, and Bhel, along with several century-old eateries located in areas such as Tulshibaug, Sadashiv Peth, Shaniwar Peth, Budhwar Peth, and Camp, have become an integral part of the city's identity. Organised food walks in Pune combine these local flavours with stories about historic food establishments, neighbourhoods, and cultural traditions, offering visitors a unique experiential tourism product. The growing influence of social media and online reviews has further increased the popularity of these food walks by encouraging visitors to share and seek authentic culinary experiences (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

Although culinary tourism has been widely studied (Hall & Sharples, 2003; Ellis et al., 2018; Kim & Eves, 2012), research focusing specifically on participants' experiences of organised food walks in Pune is limited. In particular, there is a lack of studies examining how traditional food, local stories, cultural heritage, social media influence, perceived value for money, and overall visitor satisfaction together shape the food walk experience. Addressing this gap, the present study explores participants' experiences and perceptions of food walks in Pune. The study is based on a review of relevant literature and customer reviews, followed by a structured questionnaire administered to 182 participants who had attended food walks in Pune. The findings are expected to provide useful insights for food walk organisers, tourism professionals, destination marketers, and local entrepreneurs in improving visitor experiences and strengthening Pune's position as an emerging culinary tourism destination.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culinary Tourism and Tourist Experience

In recent years, culinary tourism has become an important part of the tourism industry. Many travellers now prefer destinations that offer authentic local food along with opportunities to experience the culture and traditions of the region. Several studies have highlighted the role of local cuisine in creating memorable travel experiences. Mishra (2025) found that authentic Bihari cuisine contributed significantly to tourists' satisfaction and strengthened their emotional connection with the destination. The study also observed that the use of local ingredients, traditional cooking methods, and affordable pricing enhanced visitors' experiences while supporting sustainable tourism practices. Similarly, Raghav (2025) reported that Kerala's traditional cuisine has become an important attraction for tourists. The study suggested that culinary experiences can be further promoted through food festivals, heritage kitchens, spice trails, and better access to authentic local restaurants. Mehta (2025) also pointed out that culinary tourism extends beyond tasting food. Activities such as visiting local markets, interacting with local communities, learning traditional recipes, and understanding regional food culture enrich the tourist experience. The study further emphasised that maintaining the authenticity of local cuisine is essential, as tourists increasingly prefer genuine culinary experiences over modified versions prepared only to suit commercial demand.

Storytelling and Heritage in Food Walks

Food walks have become increasingly popular because they combine local cuisine with history, heritage, and storytelling. Unlike regular dining experiences, food walks allow participants to understand the cultural significance of local food while exploring historic neighbourhoods and interacting with local communities. Roy (2025), in a study on food tours in Jaipur, observed that storytelling adds depth to the visitor experience by connecting food with the history and traditions of the destination. The study also noted that travellers increasingly look for authentic experiences that go beyond popular tourist attractions. Likewise, Koiloth (2025) highlighted the importance of storytelling in destination branding and suggested that well-crafted local

narratives help visitors connect emotionally with a place while promoting regional food culture. Martins et al. (2023) further explained that storytelling transforms food tourism into an immersive cultural experience by linking local cuisine with people, traditions, and history.

Visitor Satisfaction and Authentic Experiences

Wan (2025) reported that authenticity, cultural interaction, and ethical food practices positively influence tourists' attitudes towards local cuisine. The study recommended that tourism providers focus on preserving authenticity while promoting meaningful interactions with local communities. Similarly, Barzallo-Neira (2025) suggested that culinary tourists have different expectations and that food tourism experiences should be designed according to visitor preferences. Yuristiadhi (2026) compared virtual and physical food tours and concluded that although virtual experiences can effectively introduce local culture and history, they cannot replace the sensory experience of tasting local food and exploring destinations in person. The study emphasised that physical food walks continue to offer richer and more memorable experiences.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to explore participants' experiences and perceptions of food walks in Pune. A qualitative approach was used to understand participants' experiences through online reviews and interviews, while a quantitative approach was used to measure their perceptions using a structured questionnaire.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Pune, Maharashtra, a city known for its rich culinary heritage, historic neighbourhoods, and growing popularity of organised food walks. These food walks combine traditional food with local history, storytelling, and cultural experiences, making Pune an emerging destination for culinary tourism.

Data Collection

The study was based on both secondary and primary data.

Secondary data were collected from research articles, books, journals, reports, websites, and other published literature related to culinary tourism, food tourism, heritage tourism, and food walks. In addition, publicly available online reviews of participants who had attended food walks in Pune were analysed to understand their experiences and perceptions.

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 182 participants who had attended one or more organised food walks in Pune. Respondents were selected using purposive convenience sampling because prior participation in an organised food walk was an essential eligibility criterion. The questionnaire was administered online through Google Forms, and the survey link was circulated to eligible participants through food walk organisers. This approach enabled the researchers to reach individuals with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. As a non-probability sampling approach was used, the findings are intended to provide exploratory and descriptive insights rather than statistical generalisation to all food-walk participants in Pune. To gain deeper insights into participants' experiences, informal interviews were also conducted with selected participants during and after the food walks.

Research Instrument

The research instrument consisted of a structured questionnaire with two sections. The first section collected demographic information, including age, occupation, number of food walks attended, and the type of food walk participated in. The second section comprised statements measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly

Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), covering five dimensions: motivation for joining food walks, storytelling and cultural heritage, social media influence, perceived value for money, and overall perception and satisfaction. The selection of these dimensions was guided by themes emerging from the literature reviewed in the study, particularly authenticity, cultural learning, storytelling, visitor experience, online influence, value, and satisfaction. Before the final survey, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with 10 participants to assess the clarity, relevance, comprehensibility, and sequence of the questions. Feedback from the pilot test was used to review the wording and presentation of the questionnaire before final administration. The questionnaire also included three open-ended questions to capture participants' memorable experiences, favourite food or stories, and suggestions for improving food walks. Since the individual-level response dataset was not retained for the present revision, internal-consistency statistics such as Cronbach's alpha could not be recalculated and are therefore not reported.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected through online reviews, interviews, and open-ended responses were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to participants' experiences and perceptions. The quantitative data were analysed using Descriptive statistical techniques, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis was based on participant reviews and informal interviews conducted during and after the food walks mentioned below.

Heritage and Storytelling

Storytelling emerged as the most important aspect of the food walk experience. Participants appreciated the historical narratives, local legends, and cultural insights shared by the guides. Many respondents mentioned that although they had visited these places before, they understood their historical significance only after participating in the guided walk. One participant described the experience as "*learning with fun*," while another commented that the stories helped them feel more connected to Pune.

Authentic Local Food

Participants highly valued the opportunity to experience authentic Maharashtrian cuisine at traditional eateries. Local favourites such as breakfast dishes, traditional bakeries, Modak, and snacks at Camp area, Pune were frequently mentioned.

Learning About Pune

Many participants felt that the walks helped them discover a different side of Pune. Even long-time residents reported learning about the city's history, heritage, and lesser-known stories, indicating that food walks appeal to both tourists and local residents.

Role of the Guides

The knowledge, enthusiasm, and friendly nature of the guides were consistently appreciated. Participants felt that the guides' storytelling skills and interaction significantly enhanced their overall experience and satisfaction.

Organisation and Visitor Experience

Most reviews described the food walks as well organised, comfortable, and family-friendly. Participants appreciated the smooth coordination, safety, and hospitality provided by the organisers. Solo travellers and families also expressed positive experiences throughout the walks.

Social Interaction

Several participants highlighted the opportunity to meet like-minded people and interact with fellow travellers. The food walks encouraged conversations and created a sense of community, making the experience enjoyable beyond the culinary aspect.

Perceived Value for Money

Participants generally considered the food walks to be worth the price paid. Many described the experience as enjoyable, informative, and highly recommended, indicating a positive perception of value for money.

Suggestions for Improvement

Although the overall feedback was highly positive, a few participants suggested making the walks more interactive, providing more detailed historical information, ensuring greater historical accuracy, and responding more actively to participant feedback.

Descriptive Statistics

The responses to the Likert-scale statements were analysed using mean and standard deviation to understand participants' perceptions of food walks in Pune. A higher mean score indicates a higher level of agreement with the statement.

Table 4.3 Item-wise Descriptive Statistics

Sr. No.	Statement	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1	Exploring authentic local cuisine motivated me to join the food walk.	4.57	0.62	Strong Agreement
2	Learning about Pune's food culture and traditions motivated me to join the food walk.	4.50	0.63	Strong Agreement
3	Discovering hidden food gems motivated me to participate.	3.48	0.88	Neutral
4	Food walk was a good leisure activity.	4.43	0.73	Agreement
5	Food walk helped me spend quality time with family and friends.	4.18	0.81	Agreement
6	The guide shared interesting stories about local food.	4.50	0.63	Strong Agreement
7	The walk increased my knowledge of Pune's culture.	4.43	0.73	Agreement
8	I learned about the history of local food establishments.	4.50	0.63	Strong Agreement
9	I learnt about the food walk through social media.	4.21	0.82	Agreement
10	Online reviews encouraged me to join the food walk.	3.96	0.89	Agreement
11	Photos and videos shared online motivated me to attend.	3.74	0.97	Agreement
12	I am likely to share my food walk experience on social media.	3.82	0.91	Agreement
13	The food walk was worth the amount paid.	3.91	0.84	Agreement
14	Compared to other leisure activities, the food walk offered good value for money.	3.86	0.88	Agreement
15	Overall, I am satisfied with the food walk experience.	4.32	0.74	Agreement
16	The food walk met my expectations.	4.25	0.76	Agreement
17	I would recommend food walks in Pune to others.	3.42	0.96	Neutral
18	Food walks are an effective way to promote Pune's culinary tourism.	4.18	0.81	Agreement

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate a generally positive perception of food walks in Pune, with mean scores ranging from 3.42 to 4.57. Authentic local cuisine emerged as the strongest motivation for participation. Respondents strongly agreed that exploring authentic local cuisine ($M = 4.57$) and learning about Pune's food culture and traditions ($M = 4.50$) motivated them to join food walks. In contrast, discovering hidden food gems received a lower mean score ($M = 3.48$), suggesting that cultural learning and authenticity may be stronger motivations than novelty alone. This supports earlier work that positions authentic culinary experiences as an important component of destination experience (Ellis et al., 2018; Kivela & Crofts, 2006).

Storytelling and heritage interpretation were also central to the experience. Participants strongly agreed that guides shared interesting stories about local food ($M = 4.50$) and that they learned about the history of local food establishments ($M = 4.50$). The qualitative findings reinforce this pattern: participants repeatedly valued historical narratives, local legends, cultural interpretation, and the knowledge and enthusiasm of guides. These results are consistent with Martins et al. (2023) and Roy (2025), who emphasise storytelling as a mechanism for creating more memorable and culturally meaningful tourism experiences.

Social media created awareness, but its influence was comparatively moderate. Learning about food walks through social media ($M = 4.21$) was rated more positively than being motivated by online reviews ($M = 3.96$) or by photographs and videos shared online ($M = 3.74$). This suggests that digital media may function more effectively as an awareness and information channel than as the sole driver of participation. The result also indicates that organisers should not depend only on visual social-media promotion; the quality of the actual experience, personal recommendations, credible reviews, and word-of-mouth are likely to remain important in building trust and encouraging participation.

An important finding is the difference between overall satisfaction and willingness to recommend. Respondents reported positive overall satisfaction ($M = 4.32$) and indicated that the food walk met their expectations ($M = 4.25$), yet the intention to recommend food walks to others was relatively lower ($M = 3.42$). This gap deserves attention because satisfaction does not automatically translate into advocacy. The qualitative suggestions—greater interactivity, more detailed historical information, stronger historical accuracy, and more active response to participant feedback—offer possible explanations and areas for improvement. Addressing these experience-level concerns may help organisers convert satisfied participants into stronger promoters of food walks.

Perceived value for money was positive but not as strong as ratings for authenticity and storytelling. Participants agreed that the food walk was worth the amount paid ($M = 3.91$) and offered good value compared with other leisure activities ($M = 3.86$). This implies that value is shaped not only by the quantity of food offered but by the combined experience of authentic cuisine, heritage interpretation, guide quality, organisation, social interaction, and cultural learning. Overall, the convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that food walks create meaningful visitor experiences when food, place, stories, and interpersonal engagement are integrated effectively.

Practical Implications

The findings have several practical implications for food walk organisers, tourism professionals, and destination marketers. First, the strong ratings for storytelling and cultural learning highlight the importance of guide training. Guides should be equipped with accurate historical knowledge as well as engaging storytelling and visitor-interaction skills. Second, because authentic local cuisine was the strongest motivation, organisers should continue collaborating with traditional eateries and local food businesses that preserve regional recipes and culinary practices. Third, the moderate influence of social media suggests that digital promotion should be combined with strategies that encourage credible reviews, repeat participation, referrals, and positive word-of-mouth. Finally, the comparatively lower willingness to recommend indicates a need for systematic participant feedback so that organisers can identify gaps in interactivity, historical interpretation, comfort, value, or service delivery and improve the overall experience.

Food Walks, Sustainable Tourism and Cultural Heritage Preservation

Food walks can contribute to sustainable tourism by directing visitor expenditure towards local eateries, neighbourhood businesses, guides, and small-scale food enterprises. They can also support cultural heritage preservation by documenting and communicating local food traditions, stories, recipes, neighbourhood histories, and the cultural meanings associated with particular foods. When these experiences are developed responsibly, food walks can disperse tourism activity beyond conventional attractions and create opportunities for local communities to participate in the visitor economy. However, authenticity should be protected from excessive commercialisation, and historical and cultural narratives should be presented accurately and sensitively. In this way, food walks can function not only as a leisure product but also as a platform for responsible destination development and cultural interpretation.

Limitations and Scope for Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, purposive convenience sampling was used, and therefore the findings may not be representative of all food-walk participants in Pune. Second, the study relies substantially on self-reported questionnaire responses, online reviews, informal interviews, and open-ended responses. Such data may be affected by recall bias and social desirability bias, while individuals who voluntarily post online reviews may differ from participants who do not post reviews. Third, the study focuses on perceived experience and satisfaction rather than objective behavioural outcomes such as repeat purchase, actual referrals, or subsequent destination behaviour. Fourth, the cross-sectional nature of the study captures perceptions at one point in time and does not examine how experiences may vary over time or across different organisers and food-walk formats. Future research could use larger and more diverse samples, compare different food-walk operators or routes, incorporate observational methods, and adopt longitudinal designs to examine changes in satisfaction, recommendation behaviour, and destination attachment.

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