



ANNALS OF GASTRONOMY AND TOURISM STUDIES

ISSN: 3023-7823		Journal homepage: www.agats.org	
Received: 09.04.2026		Accepted: 07.08.2026	
Annals of Gastronomy and Tourism Studies, 2026, 3(2), 98-104			
Research Article			
FOOD OF THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FROM PAST TO PRESENT FROM MOTHER’S DINING TABLE TO NATIONAL BRANDING			
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Abstract			
Emirati cuisine remains one of the most enduring expressions of cultural heritage in the Gulf region, shaped through the interaction of geography, maritime exchange, family life, and social continuity. This study explores how food culture in the United Arab Emirates has gradually evolved from a largely domestic and intergenerational practice into a visible component of cultural identity, tourism, and national branding. A qualitative and interpretive approach grounded in ethnographic observation and thematic analysis was adopted. Field observations were conducted intermittently between 2022 and 2026 across traditional bakeries, restaurant kitchens, seafood centres, local markets, and other public food spaces in Dubai, Sharjah, and Abu Dhabi. The study examines how dishes such as Harees, Machboos, Threed, Jasheed, and Ozi function not only as foods but also as carriers of memory, hospitality, and social meaning. The findings indicate that Emirati cuisine exists in a dynamic relationship between preservation and modernization, where inherited culinary traditions increasingly intersect with heritage initiatives and tourism economies. The study also highlights the continuing role of women, particularly mothers and grandmothers, in preserving culinary knowledge and sustaining cultural continuity across generations. Keywords: Food heritage, cultural identity, gastronomy tourism, Emirati cuisine, cultural branding			

Introduction

Historical transformations in the United Arab Emirates show that dietary patterns have long been shaped by migration, environmental adaptation, and regional trade networks. Emirati food culture developed through the interaction of desert life, coastal economies, and maritime exchange with India, Iran, and East Africa (Heard-Bey, 2005). Rapid social and economic transformation has influenced not only patterns of production and consumption but also everyday practices associated with hospitality and food culture. In Emirati society, hospitality extends beyond social convention. The dining table often becomes a place where memory, generosity, and family continuity are expressed through everyday practices. Food preparation is therefore closely connected with care, belonging, and social responsibility (Khansaheb, 2021).

One of the defining characteristics of Emirati cuisine is the transmission of culinary knowledge through everyday family practice. Mothers, grandmothers, and older female relatives have traditionally acted as custodians of cooking techniques, flavour balance, timing, and hospitality rituals. Culinary learning commonly takes place through observation, repetition, correction, and

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DOI: 10.69527/agats.2026.27

shared participation rather than through written instruction (Mintz, 1985; Long, 2004). Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

- How is culinary knowledge transmitted across generations in Emirati households?
- How has Emirati cuisine evolved from domestic food practice into a component of cultural identity, gastronomy tourism, and national branding?
- How do preservation and modernization coexist within contemporary Emirati food culture?

The article contributes to current discussions in gastronomy, cultural heritage, and tourism studies by examining Emirati cuisine as both a lived domestic tradition and a public cultural symbol. This situation underscores both the importance and the unique value of the research.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Research on food heritage increasingly recognizes cuisine as a cultural system connected to memory, identity, tourism, and social meaning. Mintz (1985) argued that food functions not only as nourishment but also as a language of historical experience and social relations. Montanari (2006) similarly described culinary traditions as living systems that adapt while preserving continuity. Food heritage has also been examined as a mechanism through which communities construct and communicate collective identity. Bessière (1998) argued that traditional cuisine frequently functions as a cultural resource linking local development, heritage preservation, and tourism. In this sense, food becomes more than a material product; it becomes a symbolic representation of place, belonging, and cultural continuity.

Studies in gastronomy tourism have shown that local cuisine frequently becomes part of destination branding and cultural representation. Richards (2012) noted that food tourism transforms domestic food traditions into experiences designed for public visibility and visitor engagement. Within Gulf studies, emerging scholarship has explored how Emirati cuisine reflects identity formation, hospitality culture, and broader social transformation. Khansaheb (2021) emphasizes the role of food in shaping cultural identity and reinforcing social values associated with hospitality, family relationships, and national heritage.

This study draws conceptually on four interconnected themes: culinary memory and intergenerational transmission, food heritage and cultural identity, gastronomy tourism and destination branding, and the negotiation between preservation and modernization. Rather than treating these themes separately, the article approaches Emirati cuisine as a cultural system in which domestic practice, social symbolism, and public representation continuously overlap and reshape one another.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design grounded in ethnographic observation and cultural analysis. The research draws partly on the author's long-term professional experience in culinary and bakery environments in the United Arab Emirates, alongside field observations conducted intermittently between 2022 and 2026.

Approximately 55–60 observation visits were carried out during the study period across more than 20 restaurants, around 30 traditional bakeries, three seafood centres, and four local markets in Dubai, Sharjah, and Abu Dhabi. Several locations were visited on more than one occasion to observe recurring culinary practices over time. The sites were selected purposively because of their relevance to traditional Emirati food production, consumption, and heritage representation. Particular attention was given to food preparation practices, customer interactions, informal systems of quality evaluation, hospitality rituals, and the social role of traditional dishes in everyday life.

No observations were conducted in private households or domestic homes. References to domestic culinary practices throughout this study are based on participants' descriptions recorded during

observations in public and professional food settings, together with evidence presented in the relevant literature.

Field notes were written shortly after each visit rather than during direct interaction in order to preserve the natural rhythm of activity and minimise disruption within the observed environments. Notes focused on sensory details, cooking practices, conversations, hospitality rituals, and recurring patterns related to food memory and cultural identity.

The study employed thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns across the observational material and relevant literature. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, the analytical process involved repeated reading of field notes, initial coding of recurring ideas, grouping related codes into broader categories, and interpreting the resulting themes within the context of gastronomy and heritage studies.

Initial codes emerged through repeated reading of the field notes and observation records. Related codes were then grouped into broader categories, and the resulting themes were interpreted in light of the conceptual framework presented in the literature review.

Four major themes emerged during the analysis (Table 1).

Table 1. Coding Structure and Theme Development

Theme	Representative Codes
Theme 1: Intergenerational Transmission of Culinary Knowledge	➤ Mothers, ➤ Grandmothers, ➤ Observation-based learning, ➤ Family hospitality, ➤ Embodied culinary knowledge
Theme 2: Symbolic Meaning of Traditional Dishes	➤ Memory, ➤ Ramadan, ➤ Sharing, ➤ Belonging, ➤ Identity, ➤ Hospitality
Theme 3: Informal Food Quality Systems	➤ Freshness, ➤ Trust, ➤ Sensory evaluation, ➤ Baker expertise, ➤ Customer feedback
Theme 4: Transformation of Food into Cultural Branding	➤ Tourism, ➤ Heritage promotion, ➤ Authenticity, ➤ Destination identity, ➤ Luxury hospitality

Accordingly, the following four themes were identified in the study: Intergenerational Transmission of Culinary Knowledge, Symbolic Meaning of Traditional Dishes, Informal Food Quality Systems, and Transformation of Food into Cultural Branding. The themes were refined through repeated comparison of field notes collected across the observation sites. Patterns that appeared consistently in different settings were retained as the core themes for interpretation. Because the study is interpretive in nature, the author's professional proximity to culinary environments was treated as both a source of insight and a point requiring continuous reflexive awareness throughout the research process.

Historical Foundations of Emirati Cuisine

The dry climate, limited freshwater resources, and coastal geography shaped the foundations of Emirati food culture. Dates, fish, dairy products, livestock meat, and marine resources formed the basis of many traditional meals. Long cooking methods developed partly as practical responses to texture softening, preservation needs, and digestibility (von Hahn, 2018).

At the same time, maritime trade networks connected Gulf societies with India, Iran, and East Africa. Through these exchanges, ingredients such as basmati rice, spices, and dried citrus fruits entered local culinary practice. Emirati cuisine therefore developed as both locally rooted and historically open to outside influence (Heard-Bey, 2005; von Hahn, 2018).

Food traditions also reflected broader social values. Hospitality practices, communal meals, and the ritual sharing of coffee and dates reinforced family relationships and social continuity within Emirati society (Khansaheb, 2021).

Findings

The findings are organised around the four themes identified through thematic analysis: intergenerational culinary knowledge, symbolic meanings of traditional dishes, informal food quality systems, and the transformation of food into cultural branding. Together, these themes illustrate how Emirati cuisine operates simultaneously as a cultural memory system, a public heritage resource, and an important part of everyday life.

Intergenerational Culinary Knowledge

The observations suggest that culinary knowledge within Emirati families is transmitted largely through embodied and practical learning. Mothers and grandmothers preserve not only recipes but also standards of timing, texture, presentation, and hospitality. Accounts recorded during field observations consistently described younger family members learning through observation, participation, and repeated practice within family settings rather than through formal instruction.

Summary of Field Observations (*Traditional bakeries and family-run food businesses, Dubai and Sharjah, 2022–2026*)

During visits to traditional bakeries and family-run food businesses, conversations frequently returned to memories of older generations, particularly mothers and grandmothers whose methods continued to influence present-day cooking practices. Participants often described how culinary knowledge had been transferred through observation, shared experience, and everyday participation rather than through written recipes.

Traditional Foods as Social and Cultural Symbols

Harees remains one of the most socially significant dishes in the United Arab Emirates. Its slow preparation and distinctive texture are closely associated with Ramadan gatherings, patience, and collective sharing. Machboos, prepared with rice, spices, and carefully balanced flavours, reflects both culinary skill and family tradition. Threed is strongly associated with communal dining and everyday hospitality, while Jasheed reflects the historical relationship between coastal communities and marine resources. Ozi, commonly prepared for weddings and major celebrations, continues to symbolize generosity, hospitality, and social unity.

References to these dishes appeared repeatedly during field observations, particularly in conversations concerning Ramadan, family gatherings, hospitality traditions, and cultural identity. Across different observation sites, traditional foods were consistently described as symbols of continuity rather than simply everyday meals.

These observations suggest that traditional Emirati dishes carry meanings extending well beyond nutrition. Their preparation and presentation frequently express hospitality, family identity, collective memory, and a sense of belonging.

Informal Food Quality Systems

Traditional bakeries and small food businesses revealed informal systems of food evaluation based primarily on trust, sensory judgement, and long-term customer relationships. Bread quality was commonly discussed in terms of crust colour, aroma, freshness, oven timing, and texture rather than through standardized industrial measures.

Summary of Field Observations (*Traditional bakeries, Sharjah and Abu Dhabi, 2022–2026*)

Customers regularly interacted directly with bakers, asking about baking time, dough texture, oven temperature, and freshness. These conversations reflected a shared practical understanding of food quality, where experience and sensory judgement were often considered more important than formal quality standards. Repeat customers frequently relied on personal trust and previous experience when evaluating products.

Contemporary Transformation and National Branding

The observations indicate that Emirati cuisine increasingly occupies a visible public role through festivals, restaurants, tourism projects, museums, and heritage initiatives. Traditional dishes are now presented not only within family life but also within luxury hospitality, gastronomy tourism, and destination branding (Richards, 2012; World Tourism Organization & Basque Culinary Center, 2019).

Public institutions, including the Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi (Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi, 2024), have contributed to promoting Emirati cuisine through cultural programmes and heritage initiatives that encourage the preservation and public presentation of traditional food culture.

Discussion

The findings suggest that Emirati cuisine should be understood as a living cultural system rather than a fixed collection of recipes. Domestic culinary traditions continue to function as important spaces through which memory, identity, and social continuity are maintained. At the same time, traditional food increasingly participates in tourism economies and public cultural representation.

These findings are consistent with scholarship that views food heritage as a dynamic cultural process rather than a static collection of recipes (Bessière, 1998; Montanari, 2006). The observations indicate that Emirati cuisine continues to function as a medium through which memory, identity, and social continuity are reproduced across generations.

The findings also support broader discussions suggesting that cultural traditions survive through continuous adaptation rather than rigid preservation. In the Emirati context, traditional foods remain meaningful because they continue to evolve while retaining strong symbolic connections to hospitality, family memory, and cultural identity. The findings further support research linking gastronomy with destination branding and tourism development (Richards, 2012; World Tourism Organization & Basque Culinary Center, 2019).

One particularly consistent observation concerns the role of intergenerational learning. Mothers and grandmothers transmit not only practical cooking skills but also values associated with care, hospitality, timing, generosity, and social etiquette. Consequently, the dining table continues to function as an important setting where cultural identity is reproduced through everyday practice.

The study also highlights the continuing balance between preservation and modernization. Traditional dishes may appear in forms closely connected with home cooking or may be reinterpreted within luxury hospitality environments. Although both forms claim authenticity, they frequently address different audiences while contributing to the continued visibility of Emirati culinary heritage.

This process reflects what Long (2004) described as culinary negotiation, whereby communities continuously reinterpret, preserve, and publicly represent their culinary traditions. Emirati cuisine therefore exists within an ongoing process of continuity and transformation rather than a simple distinction between tradition and modernity.

Conclusion

This study examined Emirati cuisine as a cultural system shaped by geography, trade, domestic practice, and public heritage formation. The findings demonstrate that culinary traditions in the United Arab Emirates continue to function as important carriers of memory, hospitality, and cultural identity, while increasingly contributing to tourism development and national branding initiatives.

The study contributes to gastronomy and heritage research by highlighting the relationship between intergenerational culinary transmission and contemporary cultural representation. It also demonstrates how informal food environments, including traditional bakeries, seafood centres, local markets, and neighbourhood restaurants, continue to preserve and communicate everyday food culture.

One limitation of this study is its reliance on qualitative observations conducted within selected urban environments. Future research may benefit from incorporating interviews, comparative regional analyses, or broader ethnographic sampling across different Emirates.

The future of Emirati cuisine will likely depend on maintaining a balanced relationship between inherited culinary practices and ongoing cultural adaptation. The continued presence of traditional food in both family life and public cultural spaces will remain essential for sustaining Emirati culinary heritage for future generations.

Ethics Statement

This study was based exclusively on non-interventional observations conducted in public and professional food environments, including restaurants, traditional bakeries, seafood centres, local markets, and cultural food spaces. No observations were conducted in private households or domestic homes. No interviews were conducted, no personal or identifiable information was recorded, and all observations were documented anonymously. Formal ethical approval was not required because the study involved observation in public and professional settings without collecting personal data. All observations were conducted in accordance with accepted principles of research integrity and confidentiality.

AI-Assisted Language Editing Statement

Artificial intelligence-assisted tools were used only for language editing and improving the clarity of the manuscript. The author takes full responsibility for the research design, observations, analysis, interpretation, and final content of the manuscript.

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