

## Potentials Of Imo Cuisine In Tourism And Hospitality Development And Sustainability

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**Abstract:** Food is an important tourism product for differentiating a group of people from another. It defines a people's identity and can be used as an instrument of prestige at an international level. People eat out not because they starve, but because they are psychologically looking for the self-identity leisure motive. This paper highlights the nutritious and delicious dishes of Imo State of Nigeria. These dishes include the ofe Owerri, ofe ugbogiri/anyu, ofe ugba/okro, ofe okoroko, ngwobi, ugba agwugwo and isi ewu pepper soup. The paper is a review work, accomplished through secondary data collection. It also proposes a model of local food consumption that will attract food tourists to Imo State. Based on the information gathered on the various dishes of Imo State, it is recommended that the government of Imo State should harness the food potentials of Imo State, project and publicize the state as a destination of note for good food. The paper is of the view that a legislation that compels hotels and hospitality outfits to include indigenous Imo dishes on their menus is important in enhancing popularity and acceptance. Food festival that involves food tours and cooking classes should be organized annually to provide memorable impressions on visitors and ensure repeat visits to Imo State, the eastern heartland.

**Keywords:** Imo cuisine, hospitality development, local foods, sustainability.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Food is an important tourism product for differentiating a group of people from another. It defines a people's identity and can be used as an instrument of prestige at an international level. The Expresso English (2020) states that food, dishes and cuisine are interchangeably used in culinary studies as prepared items of anything edible that refers to the general topic of eating. In the opinion of Hjalager and Richards (2002), tasting local food is an essential part of the tourism experience since it can serve as both a cultural activity and entertainment. Local food and beverages on holiday also play an important role in introducing tourists' new flavours and different traditions at destinations (Fields, 2002; Sparks, 2007).

The significance of food in tourism development has received significant recognition by scholars and academics in recent time (Chang, Kivela and Charters, 2010; Mak, Lumbers, Eves and Chang, 2012b; Mynttinen, Logren, Sarkka-Tirkkonen and Rautiainen, 2015). There is no doubt that food plays a major role in tourists' overall experience at the destination. Hall and Sharples (2003) assert that food is perceived as one of the most pleasurable in the tourist's experience. Tourism indeed involves an exploration by tourists at destinations with unique characteristics. Food represents one of these attributes and can be the prime motivator for travelling and the exploration of a destination. (Quan and Wang, 2004). Corroborating, Tikkanen (2007) elaborates that not only is food a need, but based on tourism it becomes a motivation for tourism. Destinations that are known for special cuisine and food culture have made tremendous revenues from food tourism as one third of tourist's expenditure is spent on food which indicates a large economic importance for a country's tourism sector (Hall and Sharples, 2003).

Today people eat out, not because they starve, but because they are psychologically looking for the 'self-identity' leisure motive (Zohreh and Yeganeh, 2011). The emergence of food tourism and festivals have not only added value to destination's economy but also given wide and credible popularity to their cuisine. For instance, Yeoman (2019) reports that food tourism shapes gastro destinations such as France, Italy and California whereas in emerging destinations such as Croatia, Vietnam and Mexico food play an important part in the overall experience.

In the perspective of Karim and Chi (2010), Italy and France are known for their cuisine in taste, presentation, the variety and the quality of food. These countries also have food activities such as wine tours, cooking class. Due to their unique cuisines, they are also able to attract gastro-tourists or foodies who want to

go behind the scenes to taste and discuss the nuances of local region-specific food and to learn about unique ingredients from cultural experts (Gastro Gatherings, 2020). Indeed, gastronomy tourism has become an important aspect of tourism to attract international tourists (Hornig and Tsai, 2010).

In Nigeria, especially in Imo State, the food culture and the broad array of nutritious, delicious and mouth-watering dishes distinguish this Igbo-speaking domain as an amazing tourist destination with potentials for food tourism. These dishes are ofe Owerri, ofe ugbogiri/anyu, ofe ugba/okro, ngwobi etc (see table 1). Whether it is in a canteen, restaurant, a hotel or a native household, a visitor to Imo State is sure of getting a treat of indigenous Imo cuisine. Apart from the goodwill remarks of Nigerians across ethnic divide concerning dishes from Imo, efforts have not yet been made by government authorities to harness the various dishes for the enjoyment of tourists and projection of Imo State as a destination of note for good food. In fact, food is one of the important considerations tourists make before selecting a destination. Stone and Migacz (2016) emphasize that memorable food and drink experiences have been linked to an increase in travel satisfaction and positive word of mouth.

## **II. CONCEPTUAL LITERATURE**

### **2.1. Imo State: background information**

At the creation of Imo State in 1976 (Onyekozuru, 2017), Owerri became its capital city. Imo people are mostly Igbo by tribe and can be found in all the twenty seven local government areas of the state, all sharing similar culture especially in culinary system and knowledge. Imo State is fondly referred to as the entertainment capital of Nigeria because of its high density of spacious hotels, high street casinos, production studios and high quality centres of relaxation. There is a traditional ruler in Imo's capital, Owerri usually referred to as His Royal Highness. In fact any important personality that visited Imo State without a courtesy call to the traditional ruler of Owerri will be regarded as having not completed his visit. When it comes to delicious traditional food, cuisine or dishes, you have a lot of options available in Imo State like nowhere else in Nigeria.

According to Mckenna (2016), the people of Imo State are predominantly Christians, found in the tropical rainforest region of Nigeria. Like most towns in Nigeria, it experiences two distinct climatic seasons: namely dry (October to March) and wet (April to September) seasons. A period of cold, dry, dusty winds known as 'Harmattan' occurs from December to February annually. In fact, Owerri cuisine remains one of the important products of tourism in this geographical space in Nigeria.

### **2.2. The role of food in tourism and regional development**

The role of food in Imo territorial dynamics has become an important issue for local and regional development (Rachao, Brenda, Fernades and J oukes, 2018). Food is one of the most important biological human needs and as such it is an inseparable part of tourism. It also represents one of the basic services during a touristic trip (Kocevski and Risteski, 2018). Tourism activities cannot be said to be complete without the pleasure derived from good food at the destination. Food is that tourist product that helps to promote memorable stay at the destination. Imagine a friendly destination with all facilities and infrastructure, but lacking in special dishes that can wow visitors! The UK Essays (2020) reports that traditional food and cuisine could be excellent tourist attraction in rural travel destinations as eating local cuisine might be an integral part of the travel experience because food serves as both entertainment and a cultural activity. One of the main implicit factors that tourists consider in choosing the destination is food (Farzad, Es-hagh, Shahram, Manouchehr and Bahman, 2011).

Ryu (2006) emphasizes that food tourists often choose a destination because of local food. Not only food tourists, but also other tourists are interested in local food. By focusing on local food, a destination can differentiate itself from other destinations, gain economic advantages, maintain cultural heritage and strengthen its identity. Indeed, food is a major aspect of the culture of a people, which endures for generations. It is hardly changed by globalization. In the words of Sengel, Karagoz, Cetin and Dincer (2015), eating is a physical need as well as a cultural and social activity. When tourists eat at a destination, they not only satisfy their hunger but also experience the local culture and interact with their hosts.

### **2.3. Food tourism: a trending tourism phenomenon**

Public interest in food has been steadily increasing, ultimately transforming food tourism into the new global trend, even more so fuelled by countries unique food experiences posted on social media sites. Food tourism focuses on culinary- food and drink that are locally sourced, rather than mere sightseeing (Millionmetrics, 2017). There is no doubt that people travel to destinations in order to experience or enjoy local food and drinks. Tourists' insatiable quest to travel for the sake of tasting and receiving satisfaction from alien cuisines is a wakeup call for countries with striking dishes to package them for celebration and sales. According to Rachao, Breda, Fernandes and Joukes (2018), different countries use distinct terms to relate food to tourism. Initial research showed different concepts being used interchangeably to associate food to tourism. Culinary

tourism appears mostly in North America publications, food tourism in Australia and New Zealand and gastronomy tourism in Europe.

OCTA and Skift (2015) defined food tourism as any tourism experience in which one learns about, appreciates, and/or consumes food and drink that reflects the local, regional or national cuisine, heritage and culture. In the perspective of the UNWTO (2012), food tourism encapsulates the intentional, exploratory participation in the food ways of another. It is the visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food tasting and/or experiencing, the attributes of specialist food production regions are the primary motivating factor for travel. Wolf (2002) explains that food tourism connotes travel for the purpose of searching prepared food and beverages and memorable gastronomic experiences.

Sengel, Karagoz, Cetin and Dincer (2015), therefore, clarifies that any visit to a restaurant is not considered as food tourism, destination choice of tourists must be shaped by a special interest into culinary, gastronomy, gourmet or cuisine. In fact, food tourism is now considered as special interest tourism, because as Smith, Macleod and Robertson (2020) puts it, special interest tourism is defined as travelling with the primary motivation of practising or enjoying a special interest. This can include unusual hobbies, activities like dining, themes or destinations, which tend to attract niche markets. The ACS Distance Education (2020) views special interest tourism (SIT) as the provision of customised tourism activities that cater to the specific interests of groups and individuals. In this case, tourism is undertaken to satisfy a particular interest or need.

#### **2.4. Significance of culinary systems (Benefits of local cuisines at destinations)**

Culinary tourism is the hottest niche to emerge within the travel industry in years because dining is one of the best ways visitors can get to know a new and exotic locale. Because regional foods and recipes are a major part of what makes one place different from another, restaurants should create unique and memorable food and drink experiences to build excitement and develop a competitive advantage (Food Safari, 2020). Imo cuisine can fulfil this goal with its amazing and varied dishes that are peculiar to them. The food tourists will be excited to see various nutritious foods on display in Imo that can be served for breakfast, lunch and dinner. According to O'Mahony (2020) culinary tourism has been attracting tourists for many years, but recently there has been a significant rise in the number of tourists travelling to discover new and unique cuisines of the world. Dining out and trying national and local cuisines are pleasant activities for most tourists (Nam, 2011; Harrington and Ottenbacher, 2010).

Food not only satisfies physical needs but also provides opportunities to enhance social relationships, learning and belonging (Hjalaga and Wahlberg, 2014; Hjalaga and Johansen, 2013). Culinary tourism could be one of the leading factors for popularising an unknown destination which suddenly becomes widely prevalent for its food. This presents an essential setback of lack of awareness creation for local dishes of the people of Imo. This is very important for the world to appreciate the amazing nutrition derivable from consumption of cuisines from Imo, as indicated in tables 1 and 2. It thus rekindles the development of the regional, public economies. It results in diversifying the lifestyle, generating employment opportunities, increasing standard of living due to increased earnings and also results to urbanization of remote localities to a certain extent (Shah and Shende, 2017). Food tourism is very significant on many grounds. It benefits the tourists that travelled for it.

Raji, Karim, Arshad and Ishak (2018) discovered that by participating in local food activities, tourists will have the opportunity to experience different local cultures and practices. Secondly, the host community is another beneficiary of food tourism. Raji et al. (2018) also reiterated that by integrating local food in rural destinations will help to strengthen destination's sustainability and competitiveness. The Jumia Foods (2017) outlines employment for food vendors and retailers, increased standard of living for people in the host community, opportunity for preservation of culture as other benefits of food tourism in a locality. The government also gains huge foreign exchange through food tourism. For instance, the World Food Travel Association (2020) documents that visitors spend approximately 25% of their travel budget on food and beverages. The figure can get as high as 35% in expensive destinations, and as low as 15% on more affordable destinations. Confirmed food lovers also spend a bit more than the average of 25% spent by travellers in general. This statistics definitely will amount to tremendous and positive growth in the GDP of any food destination if sustained or surpassed.

### **III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

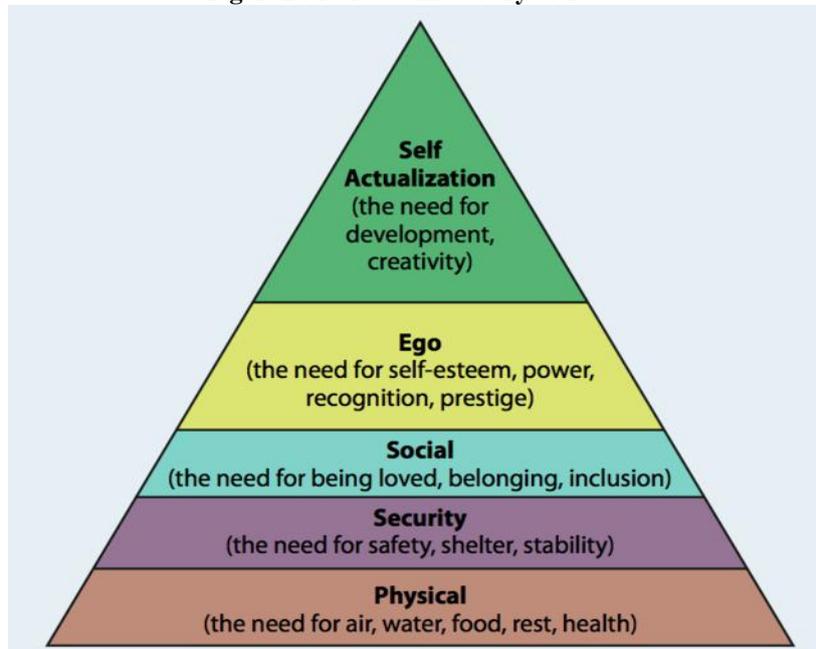
#### **3.1 Theories relating to culinary matters**

##### **3.1.1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Need**

One of the earliest theories pertaining to culinary issues is the Maslow Hierarchy of need. The theory as propounded by Abraham Maslow was a theory of human motivation. It arranged human needs in their order of priority. The model is in the shape of a pyramid and recognizes physiological needs like food, water, sleep and warmth as the most basic, important and foundation on which other needs can be attained (Cherry, 2019).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs states how crucial food and the food service industry are to human lives and survival. It also suggests why people cannot do without food even when their purpose of travel is not food. Maslow's theory also emphasizes that good food remains a vital motivation to travel to a destination in order to explore its food potentials. This is to say that destinations that have good food like Imo State should not relent in showcasing them for sale.

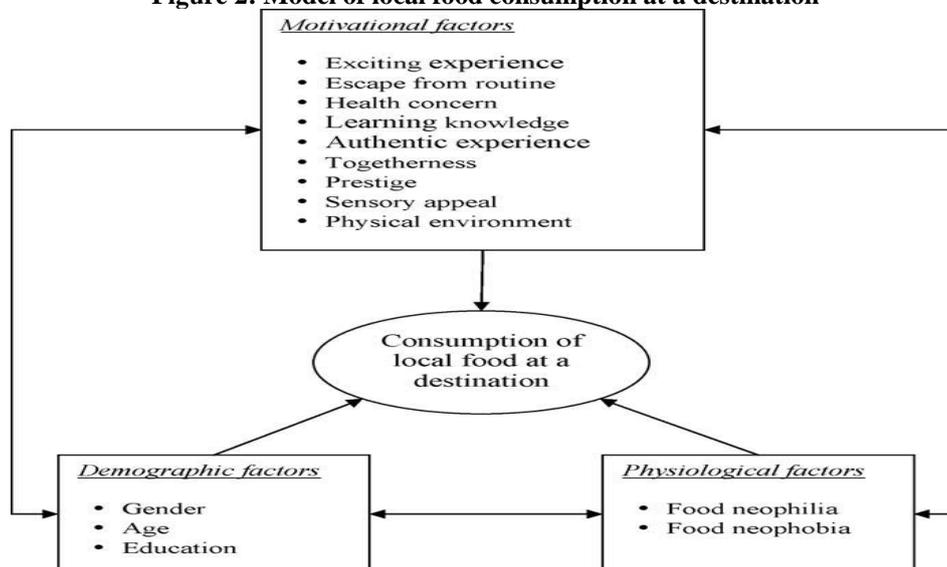
Figure1.Maslow's hierarchy of needs



Source: Burton (2012)

3.1.2: Kim, Eves and Scarles model of local food consumption at destination

Figure 2: Model of local food consumption at a destination



Source: Kim, Eves and Scarles (2009) International Journal of Hospitality Management.

The model presented by Kim et al. (2009) in Figure 2 indicates the factors that determine the choice of local food at destination. For the motivational factors, their argument is borne out of the fact that consumption of local food and beverages at a destination are supported by existing literature in the domain of hospitality, tourism and food choice research. For example, Chhabra, Healy and Sills (2003), Davidson (2002), Getz (2000), and Ignatov and Smith (2006) have highlighted that exciting experience, escape from routine, health concern, learning knowledge, authentic experience, togetherness, prestige as general travel motivations. Also Meiselman,

Johnson, Reeve and Crouch (2000), Yuksel and Yuksel (2003) have reported prestige, sensory appeal and physical environment as key determinants of service quality in the field of hospitality.

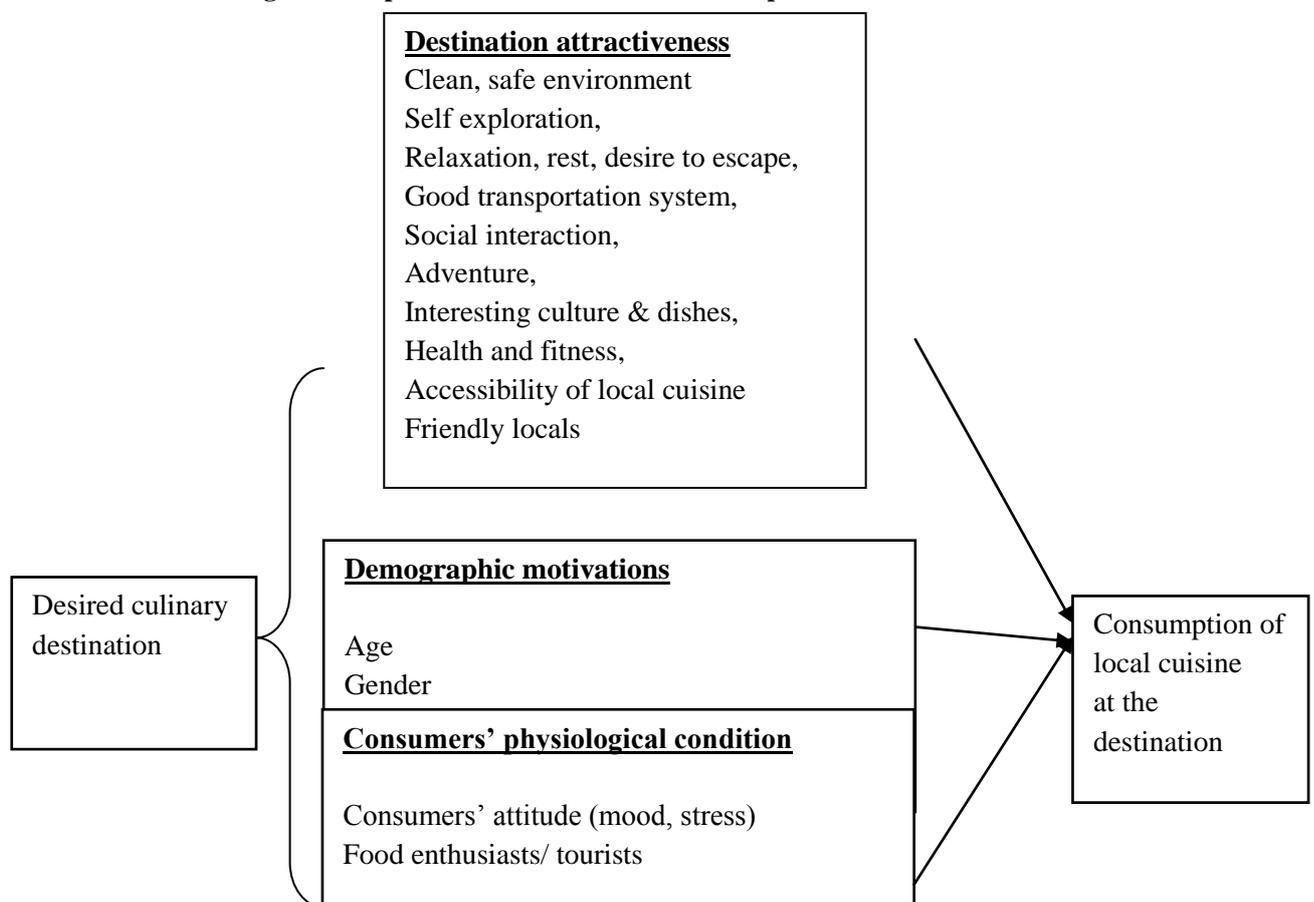
The demographic factors in the model include gender, age, and education which also determine various aspects of people’s lifestyle, nutritional intake, physical activity, standards of health and hygiene, and the levels of health and welfare services. The physiological factors constitute both food neophobia and neophilia, which are described as personality in relation to whether or not people enjoy trying new foods.

**3.1.3 Proposed model of a local food consumption in a destination**

In figure 3, a model is proposed of local food consumption in a destination. Figure 3 explains that a desired culinary destination is one that attracts visitors thereby leading to substantial consumption of local cuisine. Consumption of local cuisine is a function of the destination’s attractiveness, demographic factors as well as tourists’ physiological condition. Destination attractiveness relates to the attributes of the destination that endears it to visitors. According to Tam (2012), destination attributes are categorized into seventeen areas including safety and security, scenery, price levels, cultural attractions, attitude towards visitors, uniqueness of local people’s life, food, and availability/quality of local transportation, historical attractions, entertainment activities, festivals and special events, communications, availability/quality of accommodations, weather and climate, shopping, accessibility, and sports/recreational opportunities.

In the perspective of Ariya, Wishitemi and Sitati (2017), the more impressed visitors are with the destination, the greater visitation frequency is expected. Concerning gender, another study by Hu, Wu, Zhang, Zhang, Lu, Zeng, Shi Sharma, Xun and Zhao (2017) found that the frequency of eating out among females was higher than that among males during weekends. Similarly, in the work of Nayga and Capps (2008), findings indicate that the following variables significantly affect the number of meals purchased: region, race, ethnicity, sex, household size, age, income and time of the week consumption. The result also indicates that employed individuals consume more meals away from home than unemployed individuals. Concerning the age factor, Mak et al. (2012b) report that older people, as a result of their different taste perception and experiences prefer other foods than younger people.

**Figure 3. Proposed model of local food consumption in a destination**



### 3.2. Local foods and culinary potentials of Imo people

The state of Imo can be like the rest of the food tourism destinations of the world. The range of indigenous food obtainable in Imo includes the ofe Owerri (Owerri soup), ngwobi (meat porridge), ugba/okro soup, oha/uziza/okasi soup, ugba/corn/beans porridge etc. Ofe Owerri, ugba/okro soup and oha/uziza/okasi can be eaten as lunch mostly with pounded yam or akpu (ie fermented and cooked cassava paste), and the various brands of palm wine as drink accompaniment. The potentials of Imo cuisine are very huge. The use of local food in restaurants increases the level of local production. The making of restaurants' menu based on local food is a good alternative of menus and restaurant's marketing (Henchion and McIntyre, 2000). This suggests that there is multiplier effect contribution of local dishes on agricultural productions. This will encourage local farmers to remain in business. Besides, the practice of having local cuisine in the menus will ensure that local dishes do not drift into oblivion. Getting food items from local farmers equally ensures that fresh food products are procured as against foreign food items due to food packaging and shipping.

According to Amira (2009), local food provided for tourists has the potential to add diversity and excitement, and enhance experience. When tourists are excited after dining on local cuisine, customer satisfaction is achieved. For instance, Ladhari, Brun and Miguel (2007) found that positive emotions after dining had more impact on customers' satisfaction than negative emotions. Local food systems are expected to act as tools of urban regeneration (Janssen and Sezer, 2013) as well as endogenous rural development (Peters, 2012). Equally, Imo dishes have the potentials and benefits that include fresher, healthier, better tasting food, lower carbon emissions due to shorter transportation distances. King (2010) lends weight to the foregone assertion and elaborates that local food in the US has helped people to gain a better appreciation of where their food comes from and has strengthened consumers' sense of connection with those who produce our food.

**Table 1: Nutritional benefits of local dishes of Imo State**

S/NO	Food item	English/botanical name	Ingredients	Nutritional value
1	Ofe Owerri	Owerri soup	Cocoyam paste, palm oil, fresh pepper, salt, water, smoked and assorted fish, stock fish, snails, crayfish, ogiri (local seasoning), Ugu (fluted pumpkin leaves), oha (African rosewood leaves), uziza leaves (piper guineense).	Carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins and minerals
2	Ofeugbo giri/anyu soup	Pumpkin soup	Grated okro, snail, crayfish, periwinkle, dry fish, and palm oil, seasoning cubes, pumpkin leaves, water, fresh pepper and salt.	Carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins and minerals
3	Ofe ugba and okro	Slice oil bean & okro soup	Sliced oil bean seeds, okro, dry fish, and stock fish, seasoning cubes, palm oil, onion, fresh pepper and salt, water	Carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins and minerals
4	Ofe okoroko	Leafless soup	Cocoyam paste (thickening agent), dry fish, stock fish, fresh fish, salt, seasoning cubes, palm oil, water	Carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins and minerals
5	Nkwobi	Spicy cow foot porridge	Cow foot, palm oil, powdered edible potash, ehu seed (calabash nutmeg), crayfish, fresh peppers, onion, seasoning cubes, salt, water, utazi leaves (gongronema latifolium).	Carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins and minerals
6	Ugba agwugwo	Slice oil bean porridge	Sliced oil bean, corn and local beans, edible potash, salt, pepper, garden egg.	Carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins and minerals
7	Ji agwugwo	Yam porridge	Yam, pumpkin fruit, palm oil, fresh pepper, dry fish, crayfish, water, and onion and utazi leaves to garnish.	Carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins and minerals
8	Isi ewu pepper soup	Goat head pepper soup	Goat head, red palm oil, ground ehu, powdered edible potash, onions, utazi leaves, scent leaves (ocimum gratissimum), fresh peppers and seasoning cubes.	Carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins and minerals
9	Abacha	African salad	Shredded cooked cassava roots, shredded oil bean seeds, powdered potash, dry fish, onion, salt, fresh peppers, crayfish, utazi (optional), (onions and tomatoes to garnish).	Carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins and minerals
10	Ukwa	Bread fruit	Bread fruit seeds, potash, shredded oil bean seeds, palm oil, few maize grains, salt, fresh peppers, ogiri (local seasoning)	Carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins and minerals

11	Eberebe	Cooked & sliced cassava roots	Potash, sliced cassava roots, palm oil, salt, fresh peppers, onions, dry fish.	Carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins and minerals
12	Akpu	Fermented cassava paste	To be used in eating any of the local soups above	Carbohydrates
13	Utara ji	Pounded yam	To be used in eating any of the local soups above.	Carbohydrates

Source: Field Survey.

**Table 2: Nutritional benefits of major leafy vegetables for making Imo dishes**

S/NO	Name of vegetable	English/Botanical name	Nutritional value	Functions
1.	Ugu	Fluted pumpkin leaves/Telfairia occidentalis	Calcium, iron, potassium, and manganese. It also provides a good amount of vitamin C, A, B2, and E.	It is a good source of dietary fibre, rich in antioxidants and maintains the body tissues. It also balances the hormones, serves as anti-diabetic agent and improves blood circulation and stronger bones and teeth (Finelib, 2020).
2	Oha	African rosewood leaves/Pterocarpus mildraedii	Energy, protein, fat, carbohydrates, crude fibre, calcium, manganese, zinc	It aids digestive function, thereby preventing constipation. It regulates the body glucose levels and prevents the accumulation of calorie in the blood that can increase the blood glucose level (Anyanwu, 2018).
3	Uziza	Guinean pepper /piper guineense	Protein, dietary fibre, alkaloids, steroids, glycosides, flavonoids, essential oils, tannins, saponins, peptide, phenols, piperin, beta-caryophyllene, myristicin, elemicin, safrole, and dilapiol and apiol.	Relieves cough, prevents constipation, cancer; treats diarrhea, improves fertility and remedy for stomach ache (Nwokolo, 2019).
4	Ugbogiri/anyu	Pumpkin leaves/cucurbita pepo	Rich in vitamin A. It contains calories, protein, carbs, fibre, vitamin C, potassium, copper, manganese, vitamin B2, vitamin E and iron. It also has small amounts of magnesium, phosphorus, zinc, folate and several B vitamins	Pumpkin helps boost immunity, protect your eyesight, and promote weight loss. The antioxidant content may lower your risk of cancer. It also benefits heart health, and promote healthy skin (Raman, 2018).
5	Nchanwu	Scent leaves/ocimum gratissimum	Scent leaf contains camphor, and eugenol, and linalool. There is also methy chavicol, ocimene. The leaves and stems contain minerals and tanning substances, as well as glycosiders, sugars and phytoncides. Scent leaves also have in them vitamin C, vitamin PP, B2, carotene and rutin, protein, vegetable fats, and fibre.	It fights with gastritis, colitis, flatulence. It can help reduce stress, strengthening the nervous system, perfectly stimulates the immune system. It can also heal the effects of radiation, and if used regularly, can serve as a vaccine against smallpox (Nenge, 2019).
6	Utazi	Gongronema latifolium	It contains essential oils, hypoglycaemic, hypolipidemic, antioxidative and anti-inflammatory properties	Utazi treats issues concerning the organs, blood, and body. It is also useful in the treatment of malaria, constipation, diabetes, hypertension, nausea, and anorexia. It is also used to treat cough, intestinal worms, dysentery, and dyspepsia. Utazi also prevents the growth of cancer cells

				(Agboke, 2018).
7	Okazi	Gnetum Africanum	Okazi leaf is good source of aspartic acid, dietary fibre, cysteine, protein, vitamins, sodium, magnesium, calcium, iron, zinc, manganese, potassium, copper, glutamic acid, leucine and essential amino acids	The leaves can be used for treating sore throats, boils, warts or nausea and enlarged spleen. The leaves of okazi can also be used in treating children suffering from measles. The seeds can be used as fungicide for dressing woods and controlling excessive urination. Researchers claim that the utazi vine contains a high level of iodine (Okpala, 2015)

Source: Field Survey

The leaves in table 2 are used as medicinal herbs, spices and condiments in preparing delicious Imo dishes. The Igbo people have used these condiments for their sweet-savoury flavour for several centuries, to enhance the quality of their dishes.

#### IV. Conclusion and recommendation

With the information gathered on the variety of indigenous dishes of the people of Imo, the potentials of Imo cuisine is indeed not in doubt. The state of Imo prides itself as peaceful destination with delightful and nutritionally balanced cuisine, a domain of authentic experience and friendly people. However, observation and insights from extant literature have revealed the challenges of inadequate awareness creation for Imo cuisines. It is also discovered that there is no existing legislation in Imo that seeks to preserve and conserve its heritage especially as it concerns their amazing cuisines. To this end, government efforts in consistently, systematically and sustainably publicizing and showcasing the food potentials of Imo should not be taken for granted. There should also be a legislation that compels hotels and other similar hospitality outfits to include indigenous Imo dishes on their menus to enhance their popularity and acceptance. The government should also organize annual food tourism festival in Imo State as a way to further popularise the dishes. The food festival should involve food tours and cooking classes in order to provide memorable impressions on visitors, thereby guaranteeing repeat visit year after year.

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