

Gastrodiplomacy in Representing Local Culinary Identity: A Case Study of Senja Eatery in Labuan Bajo

Yulianus Janur¹, Yohana Etheldreda Ine Dae², Andriano Calrinto Mami³, I Wayan Duartha⁴

^{1,2,3} **Diploma III Hospitality Study Program, eLBajo Commodus Polytechnic, Labuan Bajo,**

⁴ **Bachelor of Applied Hospitality Management, eLBajo Commodus Polytechnic, Labuan Bajo**

Corresponding Author: yohanainesdae@gmail.com

Published: Juli, 2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Senja Eatery, a culinary business in Labuan Bajo, West Manggarai, implements gastrodiplomacy as a cultural diplomacy strategy to represent local culinary identity. Using a qualitative approach with participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, the research reveals three main findings. First, Senja Eatery successfully builds a strong experiential branding through an instagramable semi-outdoor concept that leverages the natural sunset moment. Second, the kitchen team acts as cultural actors who maintain the authenticity of local ingredients and traditional cooking techniques (marination, smoking for Se'i menu) while negotiating taste adaptations for international tourists. Third, the menu Nasi Campur Manggarai, Lomak, Sayur Watulangkak, Lumpia Melo, and Sopihito explicitly embeds local geographical names and social values, functioning as a medium for cultural promotion. However, a gap exists in written storytelling: the menu book remains standard and has not optimally leveraged the gastronomy narrative potential. This study contributes theoretically to micro-level gastrodiplomacy literature involving non-state actors in tourism destinations.

Keywords: gastrodiplomacy, food culture, local culinary identity, cultural representation, Labuan Bajo

© The Author(s). 2021 Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, food has transformed beyond its biological function into a medium of communication, cultural identity, and an increasingly strategic instrument of diplomacy. The concept of gastrodiplomacy, using food as a tool for cultural diplomacy to build image and appeal, is no longer limited to state policies but is also implemented by non-state actors, including medium-scale culinary enterprises (Rockower, 2012). This phenomenon opens significant research opportunities regarding how business entities can become agents of cultural representation through gastronomic practices.

Labuan Bajo, as a super-priority tourism destination, has experienced a significant increase in tourist visits every year (Manggarai Barat Tourism Office, 2023). In this context, modern tourists are not only seeking natural beauty but also authentic experiences, one of which is realized through gastronomy (UN Tourism, 2023). Local cuisine has become one of the determining factors in destination selection as well as a means to build cross-cultural understanding.

Senja Eatery, a semi-outdoor modern restaurant in Labuan Bajo, offers a unique value proposition: packaging traditional Flores and West Manggarai cuisine in a modern presentation without losing its cultural essence. This restaurant positions itself not only as a food provider but also as a space for cultural representation, a practice in line with the concept of micro-level cultural diplomacy (Rockower, 2012; Ray, 2016). However, the extent to which the cultural narrative

constructed aligns with the actual experiences of visitors becomes a crucial academic issue to investigate.

The majority of gastrodiploacy studies still focus on the national level or nation branding on a macro scale (Cho, 2019; Rockower, 2012). The literature gap at the micro level, particularly regarding how cultural diplomacy strategies are practically applied by medium-scale culinary businesses in regional tourist destinations, is still very open (Setyawan, 2025). The study on Senja Eatery aims to fill this gap by exploring concrete gastrodiploacy practices carried out by non-state actors in representing local culinary identity.

This research aims to analyze: (1) Senja Eatery's strategy in representing local culinary identity thru gastronomy as a form of cultural diplomacy; and (2) how the implementation of gastronomy at Senja Eatery reflects the values and cultural character of West Manggarai. The research results are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of literature on non-state actor gastrodiploacy, as well as practical contributions for actors in the creative culinary industry in the tourism area.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a single case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research focuses on meaning-making, identity representation, and cultural practices that cannot be measured numerically but need to be understood contextually and interpretively (Creswell & Poth, 2024). The case study design allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of specific phenomena in their real context (Yin, 2018). The research was conducted at Senja Eatery, a semi-outdoor modern restaurant located in Labuan Bajo, West Manggarai Regency, East Nusa Tenggara. The selection of the location is based on three considerations: (1) Senja Eatery makes local culinary identity a central element of its business strategy; (2) Labuan Bajo is a super-priority tourism destination with high tourist dynamics; and (3) the availability of adequate access for comprehensive data collection.

The determination of informants used purposive sampling technique, which is the deliberate selection of informants based on their relevance to the research objectives (Sugiyono, 2023). The informants include: the restaurant manager, the chef/head of the kitchen at Senja Eatery, the service staff (waiters), and customers who have enjoyed the local specialty menu. The total number of informants interviewed was eight, selected based on their knowledge and roles in the gastronomic practices of Senja Eatery.

Data collection was conducted thru method triangulation consisting of three techniques: (1) Participatory observation, where the researcher directly engaged in Senja Eatery's activities during the March–May 2026 period, focusing on interior design, food processing and presentation, as well as staff-customer interactions (Sugiyono, 2023; Spradley, 2016); (2) Semi-structured interviews conducted with key informants using a flexible interview guide to explore the construction of meaning and in-depth perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Seidman, 2013); and (3) Documentation, including the analysis of internal restaurant documents (menu lists, promotional materials), as well as visual documentation of the interior and food presentation (Bowen, 2009; Sugiyono, 2023).

Data analysis uses the interactive analysis model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes three simultaneous stages: (1) Data reduction, selecting and simplifying data according to the research focus on the representation of local culinary identity; (2) Data presentation in the form of descriptive narratives, matrices, and tables to identify patterns and themes; and (3) Conclusion drawing and verification, drawing conclusions based on identified patterns and verifying them with field data repeatedly.

Data validity is ensured thru method triangulation (comparing results from observations, interviews, and documentation) and source triangulation (comparing information from managers, chefs, staff, and customers), as recommended by Miles et al. (2014) to enhance the credibility and dependability of the findings. This section contains an explanation of the stages of research that describes the logical sequence to obtain research outputs according to expectations.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Based on field observations and interviews, this restaurant has successfully built its main strengths in the aspects of interior, branding, and customer experience. Table 1 below presents the results of the observational analysis of various operational aspects of Senja Eatery.

Table 1: Results of Operational Observation of Senja Eatery, May 2026

Aspect	Indicator	Finding	Notes
Interior	Cultural Ornamentation	Cultural elements remain limited to local wood materials; no distinctive traditional ornaments are prominently displayed.	The addition of woven fabrics from Flores or region-specific decorative elements has the potential to strengthen the restaurant's identity.
	Spatial Design	The concept adopts an open-space/semi-outdoor design; the arrangement of tables is aesthetically pleasing, Instagrammable, and optimal during sunset hours.	The design appeals to younger generations; however, solutions for outdoor comfort during extreme weather conditions (rain or heat) are required.
Menu	Signature Local Menu	The menu combines local dishes (Manggarai Mixed Rice, Watulangkhas Vegetables, Moke Lumpia) with modern Western-style menu options.	Greater variation of local menu items is needed to further develop a unique culinary identity representative of Senja Eatery.
	Menu Description	Menu descriptions remain relatively standard (dish name and main ingredients only) and have not yet incorporated storytelling elements.	A brief philosophical narrative or QR code linked to digital content explaining the cultural background of local dishes should be incorporated.
Presentation	Plating	Food presentation employs modern plating using aesthetic ceramic plates and woven trays as serving bases.	Consistency in plating aesthetics should be maintained during peak hours to ensure visually appealing presentation.
Service	Staff Communication	Staff members are friendly; however, menu explanations remain normative and are not yet optimal in implementing upselling strategies.	Regular training is necessary to improve staff capability in delivering persuasive and informative menu explanations.
Customer Experience	Customer Response	Customers respond positively to the ambiance and actively share their experiences on Instagram and TikTok.	Some criticism concerns serving time during peak restaurant hours; therefore, kitchen workflow optimization is necessary.
Branding	Concept Consistency	The name "Senja Eatery," warm color tones, and overall atmosphere consistently support a unified thematic concept.	The branding is already strong in visual aspects; however, continuous digital content is needed to reinforce aesthetic value.

Source: Research Findings, May 2026

By adopting an esthetic open-space or semi-outdoor concept, Senja Eatery is able to optimally utilize the twilight moment as a main attraction for the younger generation. The harmony between the name, the warm-toned visual logo, and the Instagrammable atmosphere of the place creates a strong branding identity that is relevant to current lifestyle trends. Customers no longer just come to eat, but to purchase an experience of relaxing, taking photos, and enjoying the atmosphere—a manifestation of successful experiential branding.

Although the visuals and atmosphere of the place are already very strong, there is a gap between the modern esthetics and the emphasis on local identity. The wood materials used only provide a normative natural impression, without touching on specific cultural representation. Senja Eatery has a great opportunity to integrate local cultural elements such as traditional Flores ikat woven fabrics as decorative accents or regional carvings, without compromising the essence of the building's modernity. Operational challenges such as the comfort of the outdoor area during extreme weather and slow serving times during rush hour are also crucial points that need to be addressed.

Gastrodiplomacy Strategy: Authenticity, Innovation, and Flavor Negotiation

Based on field observations and in-depth interviews with the chef of Senja Eatery, it was found that the representation of local culinary identity is realized thru three pillars of gastronomic strategy: (1) the use of local ingredients and techniques, (2) adaptive menu innovation, and (3)

gastronomic storytelling. One of Senja Eatery's main efforts is to maintain the use of local ingredients as the primary identity in every menu. The use of traditional spices, local seafood, and raw materials from local farmers and markets demonstrates an effort to maintain the connection between food and the cultural identity of the local community. Chef Senja Eatery emphasized:

"We indeed strive to use as many local ingredients as possible because that is what gives the food at Senja its unique flavor." Local spices cannot be easily replaced because that is where the identity of the flavor lies." (Chef Senja Eatery, interview, May 2026)

The statement shows that the use of local ingredients not only aims to maintain the quality of taste but also serves as a form of cultural representation thru authentic flavors. Furthermore, Senja Eatery maintains traditional cooking techniques even when combined with modern equipment:

"We use modern tools to be more efficient, but basic techniques like marinating spices, smoking for the Se'i menu, or traditional spice blends are still preserved so that the local character is not lost." (Chef Senja Eatery, interview, May 2026).

This quote proves that kitchen modernization does not exclude tradition. There is a hybridization between modern technology and traditional methods, a form of negotiation between operational efficiency and cultural preservation. In the perspective of Food Culture Theory (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013), this practice represents a conscious effort to preserve the symbolic meaning of food as a cultural heritage.

Menu Innovation and Gastronomic Negotiation

Senja Eatery also innovates its menu as a form of adaptation to the modern tourism market, particularly to reach international tourists. The chef explained the flavor negotiation process:

"Sometimes foreign tourists are curious about local food, but not everyone can handle flavors that are too strong or too spicy." So we have to adjust without losing its main characteristics." (Chef Senja Eatery, interview, May 2026).

These findings reflect that the representation of culture thru gastronomy is not static, but rather involves a negotiation process between cultural authenticity and modern market needs, a 'gastronomic negotiation' process that aligns with Ray's (2016) concept of ethnic culinary adaptation in a global context. Adjustments to the level of spiciness and the reduction of the concentration of certain spice aromas are made without sacrificing the original flavor structure of the dish, so that local cuisine remains palatable to cross-cultural palates.

Gastronomic Storytelling as a Medium of Cultural Diplomacy

In addition to food preparation, efforts to represent culture are also carried out thru gastronomic storytelling. Some dishes at Senja Eatery are accompanied by oral explanations about the origins of the food, the philosophy of the ingredients, and the cultural values embedded in them. The chef explained:

"We don't just serve food, but also try to explain the story behind the menu." Sometimes guests are interested because they want to know the origin of the food or the philosophy behind the spices used—but this is often done by the waitstaff." (Chef Senja Eatery, interview, May 2026).

This storytelling practice has become an important part of gastrodiploamacy because it helps create an emotional connection between visitors and the culture represented thru food (Rockower, 2012). Chefs have a strategic function as cultural actors who translate cultural identity into culinary experiences:

"My task and that of the cook helper is not just to ensure the food is delicious, but also to make sure the food retains its local identity even when presented in a modern way—this applies to both Balinese and Flores menus." (Chef Senja Eatery, interview, May 2026).

Referring to Food Culture Theory (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002; Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013), food is a direct representation of a society's social identity, geographical space, and value system. Senja Eatery explicitly implements this theory thru the construction of a menu that not only highlights flavors but also incorporates names as identities.

“Nasi Campur Manggarai and Lomak”

The Nasi Campur Manggarai menu serves as a collective representation of the local community's consumption habits, which are based on the richness of spices and natural ingredients. Meanwhile, Lomak, a dish made from papaya leaves, cassava leaves, or papaya flowers mixed with grated coconut and traditional spices, reflects the philosophical values of the Flores community, which has a close relationship with nature and adheres to a principle of modest living. The presentation of Lomak in a modern style on an esthetic ceramic plate is a form of elevating the class of traditional cuisine without losing its cultural substance.

Watulankas Vegetable and Melo Spring Rolls

The naming of these two dishes integrates geographical elements and local tourist destinations in West Manggarai. Watu Langkas and Melo (the name of a famous tourist village in West Manggarai) attached to the culinary products serve as an indirect medium for cultural promotion. Tourists who order this dish are automatically introduced to the topographical space and cultural landscape of the place they are in, a practice that brings together gastronomy with the function of tourism promotion. These findings align with Tuan (1977) on place attachment and are relevant to the concept by Podung et al. (2024) regarding the connection between gastronomy and destination identity.

Sopihito: A Bold Pop Culture Innovation

The Sopihito drink menu is the most representative form of gastronomic innovation. Sopi, a traditional alcohol with a sacred closeness in ritual customs, social gatherings, and a symbol of togetherness for the people of NTT, combined with the modern mocktail/cocktail concept of Mojito, gives birth to Sopihito. This innovation breaks the stigma of traditional drinks and packages them into an elegant pop culture product, with high economic value, and acceptable to the modern tourism market. This is a concrete example of the negotiation process between tradition and modernity (Ray, 2016), where local culinary identity is repackaged to be relevant to contemporary tastes without completely losing its cultural significance.

Discussion

Integrating all the findings, this research confirms that Senja Eatery practices gastrodiploacy at the micro level, a phenomenon that enriches the literature which has so far been dominated by studies of state gastrodiploacy (Cho, 2019; Rockower, 2012). As a cultural intermediary (Ray, 2016), Senja Eatery represents local culinary identity to consumers from diverse social and cultural backgrounds thru a combination of three strategies: (1) the use of authentic local ingredients and techniques; (2) adaptive negotiation to global market tastes; and (3) cultural promotion thru geographically and locally valued menu naming.

These findings align with Nye's (2004) soft power framework: Senja Eatery builds cultural appeal not thru coercion, but thru engaging, informative, and emotional gastronomic experiences. Food is not only positioned as a consumption commodity but also as a symbol of identity, values, and the collective memory of the local community. However, the sustainability of this practice heavily relies on strengthening the written storytelling dimension and human resource training, so that the cultural narratives are consistently and standardizedly conveyed to every visitor.

From the perspective of Food Culture Theory (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013; Mintz & Du Bois, 2002), the practices of Senja Eatery represent a form of production and distribution of cultural meaning thru gastronomy. The process of negotiation between authenticity and modernity identified in this study reflects the complex dynamics of cultural identity preservation amidst the pressures of globalization (Setyawan, 2025; Putra et al., 2021). Senja Eatery has successfully proven that culinary business entities can be effective agents of cultural soft power, a potential that needs to be supported by a conducive tourism policy ecosystem.

CONCLUSIONS

This research confirms that Senja Eatery practices gastrodiploacy at the micro level as a non-state actor in representing the local culinary identity of Manggarai Barat and Flores. Three main conclusions can be drawn: First, Senja Eatery successfully built a strong experiential branding thru an instagrammable semi-outdoor concept that utilizes the natural sunset momentum. The visual

harmony of warm tones in the logo and the atmosphere of the place has proven effective in building an organic digital reputation. However, the emphasis on cultural identity in the interior is still normative and does not specifically represent local cultural ornaments.

Second, the practice of gastrodiploacy centers on the role of chefs and kitchen teams as cultural actors. A dialectical hybridization occurs between operational modernization and the preservation of tradition thru the retention of fundamental cooking techniques (Se'i smoking, manual spice marination). Gastronomic negotiations, adjustments in spiciness levels and aroma concentration for foreign tourists, are carried out without sacrificing the authentic taste identity, making local cuisine palatable to cross-cultural palates.

Third, the menu of Senja Eatery—Nasi Campur Manggarai, Lomak, Sayur Watulankas, Lumpia Melo, and Sopihito—explicitly embeds the social identity, geographical space, and philosophical values of the local community, serving as a medium for cultural promotion and tourist destination. However, a critical gap was found: the menu book is still standard and has not yet fully utilized the power of gastronomic storytelling, so the cultural narrative still heavily relies on the verbal abilities of the staff, which have not been standardized.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of the literature on non-state actor gastrodiploacy at the micro level, an area that remains underexplored in tourism and cultural communication studies. Practically, this study offers three recommendations: (1) redesigning the menu with creative narratives or interactive QR Codes; (2) integrating specific local cultural ornaments (Flores ikat woven fabric, distinctive carvings) into the interior; and (3) periodic staff training to strengthen gastronomic storytelling capacity.

The limitation of this study lies in the scope of a single case study, which restricts the generalization of the findings. Further research is recommended to: (a) expand the comparative scope to other local culinary restaurants in Labuan Bajo; and (b) quantitatively measure the impact of gastronomic storytelling on the satisfaction and loyalty levels of cross-cultural tourists in the super-priority tourism area.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the research employed a single qualitative case study focusing solely on Senja Eatery in Labuan Bajo. While this approach enabled an in-depth understanding of gastrodiploacy practices within a specific context, the findings cannot be statistically generalized to other culinary businesses or tourism destinations with different socio-cultural characteristics. Second, the study relied on a relatively limited number of informants consisting of restaurant management, kitchen staff, service staff, and customers. Although triangulation was conducted to enhance credibility, the perspectives collected may not fully represent the diversity of experiences among domestic and international tourists. Third, the field observations were conducted during a relatively short research period (March–May 2026). Consequently, seasonal variations in tourist characteristics, visitor behavior, and restaurant operations during peak and low tourism seasons were not examined. These temporal limitations may influence the comprehensiveness of the findings regarding gastrodiploacy implementation. Finally, this research primarily explored cultural representation from the producer's perspective. It did not quantitatively assess visitors' perceptions, satisfaction, cultural understanding, or behavioral intentions after experiencing the gastronomic offerings. Therefore, the actual effectiveness of gastrodiploacy in influencing tourists' attitudes remains an area requiring further investigation.

SUGGESTION

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be proposed. From a practical perspective, Senja Eatery should strengthen its role as a cultural ambassador by integrating structured gastronomic storytelling into menu books, digital QR-code content, and standardized staff communication. The incorporation of distinctive local cultural elements, such as Flores woven textiles, traditional carvings, and localized interior design, may further reinforce the restaurant's cultural identity without compromising its contemporary concept. Continuous staff training on

cultural interpretation and storytelling is also recommended to ensure consistent delivery of local narratives to visitors from different cultural backgrounds.

From an academic perspective, future studies should extend the investigation by comparing multiple local restaurants implementing gastrodiploamcy strategies across different tourism destinations. Mixed-method or quantitative approaches are also recommended to examine the relationships between gastronomic storytelling, destination image, tourist satisfaction, revisit intention, and cultural appreciation. Longitudinal research involving different tourism seasons would further provide a more comprehensive understanding of how gastrodiploamcy practices evolve over time and influence destination competitiveness.

REFERENCES

- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Cho, H. J. (2019). Gastrodiploamcy as a tool of public diplomacy: South Korea's global Korean food campaign. *Public Relations Review*, 45(1), 13–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2018.12.001>
- Counihan, C., & Van Esterik, P. (2013). *Food and culture: A reader* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2024). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Dinas Pariwisata Manggarai Barat. (2023). *Data statistik pariwisata Kabupaten Manggarai Barat tahun 2020–2023*. Dinas Pariwisata Manggarai Barat.
- Mintz, S. W., & Du Bois, C. M. (2002). The anthropology of food and eating. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31, 99–119. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.32.032702.131011>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. PublicAffairs.
- Podung, G., Alifah, W. R., & Furqan, A. (2024). Strategi pengembangan destinasi pariwisata berbasis gastronomi di coastal tourism Pulau Bangka. *Media Pariwisata*, 5(1), 23–32. <https://doi.org/10.34013/mp.v5i1.1406>
- Putra, M. K. (2021). Identitas gastronomi dan perspektif pariwisata yang berkelanjutan. *Jurnal Ilmiah Pariwisata*, 26(1), 95–110.
- Ray, K. (2016). *The ethnic restaurateur*. Bloomsbury.
- Rockower, P. S. (2012). Recipes for gastrodiploamcy. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 8(3), 235–246. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2012.17>
- Seidman, I. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (4th ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Setyawan, D. (2025). *Diplomasi budaya di era modernisasi: Studi kasus aktor lokal*. Gadjah Mada University Press.
- Spradley, J. P. (2016). *Participant observation*. Waveland Press.
- Sugiyono. (2023). *Metode penelitian kualitatif* (3rd ed.). Alfabeta.
- Tuan, Y. F. (1977). *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. University of Minnesota Press.
- UN Tourism. (2023). *Tourism highlights*. United Nations World Tourism Organization.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.