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CSEAS COMMENTARY



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CSEAS Commentary #50 / Sept 2025

From Kitchen to Economy: How Malaysian Cuisine Fuels Economic Growth

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On the 22nd of June, Tourism Malaysia, through the Embassy of Malaysia in Phnom Penh, organized the [Malaysia Food and Culture Fest 2025](#) at the Chaktomuk Walk Street. About 30 business operators joined the two-day events not only to sell goods, but also to showcase the diverse cuisine of Malaysia. From classic [Malaysian food](#) like Satay,

Rendang, and teh tarik, using local cuisine as a tool to promote to foreign audiences showcase Malaysia's long-term goal not only to preserve its culinary identity but to drive its economy.

Malaysia's efforts to market its cuisine globally is to cushion its economy from the U.S. tariff. Malaysia has already been dealing with its domestic economic uncertainty such as slow GDP growth to 4.5% in the first quarter of 2025. Thus, [President Trump's 19% tariff](#) on Malaysian goods would severely impact its economy further. Sectors such as electronics, furniture, and solar panels have been hit hard, especially as [Reuters reported](#) that Malaysia's solar panel exports to the U.S. had dropped by 33% in just nine months.

To cushion itself from further impacts, Malaysia turned to the [service sector](#), which not only accounts for half of its GDP, but also has not been the target of tariffs. Malaysia is well-placed to weather Trump's tariff only if they can strengthen its service sector, especially tourism. According to the [World Travel & Tourism Council](#), the Malaysian tourism sector contributed \$51.6 Billion USD (RM218.9 billion), accounting for 10.1% of the overall GDP in 2024. Malaysia also welcomed 25 million tourists as well as supporting approximately 3.1 million jobs.

The Malaysian government has formulated a number of strategies to enhance growth of the tourism industry, including the [Tourism Malaysia Strategic Plan 2022-2026](#), the [Tourism Malaysia Marketing Plan 2022-2026](#), and the [National Tourism Policy 2020-2030](#). To attract more visitors and foster deeper appreciation of Malaysia's cultural heritage, Malaysia wants to position itself as a "[gastronomy paradise](#)". This includes culinary partnership and collaboration with embassies and the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE) to organize consumer events at shopping sites to promote Malaysia's tourism industry.

The Malaysia Food and Culture Fest 2025 is a side event to boost tourism via the campaign "[Visit Malaysia 2026](#)". Malaysia is planning to bring 31.4 million tourists this year and [35.6 million tourists in 2026](#), and is targeting US\$28.7 billion in tourism contribution. The integration of Malaysian food into [tourism marketing campaigns](#) can enhance the overall appeal of Malaysia as a travel destination. However, does promoting its cuisines TRULY enhance the tourism industry?

In a survey conducted by the [ASEAN – Japan Center](#), respondents gave a variety of reasons for choosing Malaysia as their travel destination, with "scenery and atmosphere" ranking highest (36.0%), "natural scenery" (33.3%), and "food ingredients and cuisine" (33.1%) among the top three.

Another research paper on [international tourists' motivation to visit Penang in Malaysia](#) showed that 'cultural and historical' factor was the most influential motivation, largely due to its diversity and identity in terms of culture, especially diverse cuisine, multi-racial society, different practices and beliefs, and historical relics.

The rationale is simple: every tourist who comes to Malaysia will have to eat somehow, might as well enjoy local Malaysian food. According to statistics from Tourism Malaysia 2024, most [tourists expenditure](#) came from shopping (37.4%), accommodation (18.1%), and food and beverages (16.1%). Such spending contributes hugely to the Malaysian economy, making cuisine not just cultural promotion, but also a vital source of revenue.

This is not the first time Malaysia has used food to strengthen its economy. In 2006, Malaysia launched the "[Malaysia Kitchen for the World Program](#) (MKP)", a government-led initiative by MATRADE to introduce Malaysian cuisine and local commodities worldwide. The program included the support from the Malaysian government to help Malaysian restaurateurs to open and improve their restaurants abroad. The more Malaysian restaurants there are, the greater the interest in the cuisine, the stronger the affinity for Malaysian food products, the higher Malaysia's export potential. Today, more than 1,000 Malaysian product lines are representing 265 brands in 50 mainstream supermarkets in London, New York, Sydney, and Auckland, following 23.7% growth in revenue for restaurants registered with MKP.

Not only is Malaysian gastronomy important in propelling the tourism sector, it also acts as a source of income for many Malaysians. The food industry in Malaysia significantly boosts job opportunities within tourism. The tourism sector is expected to support more than [3.5 million jobs](#) and open an additional 860,000 new positions by 2035.

A [report](#) by the Department of Statistics Malaysia indicated that 16% of the \$43.12 billion USD (RM182.4 billion) generated by the tourism sector came from food-related activities. According to the latest [Statistics of Tourism Satellite Account \(TSA\)](#), in 2022, 23.4% (3.6 million) of the Malaysian workforce were associated with the tourism industry, with the food and beverage (f&b) sector contributing 35.1% of this workforce. In 2023, [Malaysia's F&B sector generated \\$54.09 billion USD \(RM228.66 billion\)](#) in revenue, with a projected compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 7.95 per cent from 2023 to 2027. The industry contributed 3.3 per cent to Malaysia's GDP, with projections indicating an increase to 3.9 per cent by 2028. This can push Malaysia's service sector into its peak.

Malaysian cuisine is [extremely diverse](#), reflecting its multiculturalist society, which includes Malay, Indian, Chinese, Nyonya (Paranakan), and Eurasian communities. Each group has their own unique food, cooking styles, and ingredients. Known as "[Asia's Food](#)

[Paradise](#)”, Malaysia is home to bustling night markets, hawker stalls, and fine dining restaurants that offer iconic national dishes such as nasi lemak, roti canai, char kway teow to western, Peranakan cuisines and more. Despite its diversity, Malaysian cuisine is also very inclusive, particularly for Halal consumers.

Malaysia’s diverse food offerings appeal strongly to tourists, especially Muslim visitors. This presents an opportunity for Malaysia to expand its halal economy by becoming the world’s leading halal hub. Known for its exceptionally high halal standard, Malaysia [attracted 2.12 million Muslim travelers](#) visiting in 2023 especially from the Middle East and OIC countries. The success stems from Malaysia’s strength in accommodating to muslim visitors who demand for halal goods and services, such as food and beverage, personal care and cosmetics, textiles, finance, e-commerce, hospitality, and tourism. [Malaysia’s halal infrastructure](#) got Malaysia ranked first in the Muslim travel market as the preferred destination among Muslim travelers worldwide according to [the 2023 Global Muslim Travel Index \(GMTI\)](#).

“Malaysia Truly Asia” is not just a tagline, but an ambitious plan to showcase the nation’s diverse culture to the world. By promoting dishes like nasi lemak, it carries a significant goal of helping Malaysia achieve high-income nation status. In this sense, food can truly be a weapon for growth.

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The author gratefully acknowledges peer review and constructive feedback from Lim Chhay.

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