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COOKING BETWEEN HERITAGE AND MODERNITY: MALAYSIAN CHEFS' CREATIVE PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Amid rising global interest in heritage cuisines, Malaysian chefs are increasingly redefining culinary creativity by blending tradition with contemporary techniques and presentation. This study aims to explore how Malaysian chefs practice and interpret creativity in professional kitchens, particularly in balancing cultural heritage with modern culinary expectations. Using a narrative ethnographic approach, the study draws on in-depth interviews and participant observation with 12 executive chefs from modern dining restaurants in Kuala Lumpur. The findings are organised around three interconnected narrative threads. First, creativity functions as a mode of personal experimentation, where chefs explore new flavours, techniques, and ingredient combinations while reflecting on their culinary experiences and professional expertise. Second, creativity operates as cultural storytelling, with chefs drawing on Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous culinary traditions to craft dishes that communicate heritage, identity, and collective memory. Third, creativity emerges as an adaptive practice, where chefs respond to global dining trends, social media influences, and evolving consumer preferences, integrating innovation without discarding the essence of traditional flavours. Together, these findings suggest that creativity in Malaysian kitchens is not a one-off act of invention but a continuous and reflective process shaped by personal insight, cultural grounding, and professional adaptability. By demonstrating how chefs negotiate modern culinary demands while maintaining cultural authenticity, this study contributes to discussions on culinary creativity, professional practice, and heritage-based innovation, offering insights for culinary educators, aspiring chefs, and industry practitioners seeking to cultivate innovation that remains culturally grounded.

Keywords: culinary creativity, chef practices, cultural heritage, innovation in cuisine, narrative ethnography