



Creating the food tour in Southwest Vietnam / Mekong Delta Area

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Abstract

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<p>Food tourism has greatly emerged over the past three decades because of its features such as authenticity, locality, and sustainability fitting the global development trends and expectations. The Southwest region of Vietnam has been a well-known tourist destination for domestic and international travelers. However, there are not many tours that are devoted to food.</p> <p>The author suggested this trend to UGO company, which is a traveling operator, targeting the main customer segment in Ho Chi Minh City. The company demands a 3-day and 2-night tour devoted to food and beverages as a new product to increase its competitiveness in the market. The aim of this thesis is to combine those two points: creating a food tour of 3 days and 2 nights in the Southwest area, Vietnam for millennials from Ho Chi Minh City. The millennials are chosen because they have some characteristics that fit the food trends, they are interested in authenticity, handcrafting, and locality from goods, and they are happy to pay more for products from makers who care about social programs. The thesis started in the middle of September 2022.</p> <p>This thesis uses the qualitative method and technique of non-participant observation to collect the information and later build the food tour. The author was observing 56 current tours in Vietnamese and 15 tours in English from 71 websites from operators and travel agents and used two tables of the primary and secondary criteria following the theoretical framework part to select the destinations. The outcome tour includes 5 main destinations divided into 3 days and 2 nights, each destination includes from one to three spots of food and/or beverages place.</p> <p>The tour was designed by the online application of Canva and the product is following a brochure format. The brochure includes typical food information at the destinations. The selected destinations are local eatery places, cafeterias, floating restaurants, fruit gardens, restaurants on the yacht, and the local food court.</p> <p>In the last part of the thesis, development ideas are suggested for the Region's food tourism. For instance, English could be written much more than current practice on tourism operators' websites as well as tourist agents. This could absorb more foreign people living in Ho Chi Minh City, and internationals to access all the fascinating places available. There are also suggestions to encourage foreign people to make reviews more to increase interaction with this segment.</p>
Key words Food tourism, Food trail, Culinary, Gastronomy, Southwest Vietnam.

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1 Introduction

Food tourism has greatly emerged over the past three decades because its features such as authenticity, locality, and sustainability fit the global development trends and expectations (Ellis, Park, Kim & Yeoman 2018). The author had an opportunity to study this trend more through the Hungry for Finland project in Research and Development. Since that time, the author has thought of Vietnam, a tropical state with a diverse food background that can support tourism development. The author contacted a small company operating in Ho Chi Minh City who aware of this trend and would like to build some typical tours following it. The company, UGO has been running for six years, and is endeavouring back to the new normal with new products after suffering the pandemic period. By cooperation with the author, and creating new products for food tourism, the company expects to bring more new experiences and moments to customers and take a chance to connect closely to the suppliers in the Southwest who directly provide the products and services to customers.

This thesis is about designing a tour that includes destinations in a short tour which is a trend at the current time. Since the trip navigated to food experiences, selected places will be expected to represent the typical food and its activities which eases the process of exploring culture (Horng & Tsai 2010).

The main objective of this thesis is going to create a product of food tours that is quite different from other traditional tours which are usually based on sight-seeing or spiritual purposes. The role of gastronomic experiences remains underexplored compared to the large number of academic articles discussing traditional markets in terms of cultural landscapes, as well as community-based tourism (Sakdiyakorn & Sivarak 2015). The result is going to be the specific food route that includes local food destinations and ordered trails recommended in the Southwest region, of Vietnam. Going along with the main objective, this paper has three sub-objectives:

- The food route will catch the food trends around the world that includes sustainability, authenticity and locality, food stories and storytelling, and short tours.
- This food tourism trail will help customers know more about the local food culture and experience true food tourism in the Mekong Delta area, in Vietnam
- This food tour is one of the ideas to travel operators connecting with local households who can contribute to the customer experience and earn economic benefits for themselves.

This is a product-based thesis, and the author is going to narrow down the topic, this also helps the commissioner focus more on the segment. Firstly, this study will only focus on food tourism and similar terms by going directly to those definitions as well as the points of view of previous studies.

Secondly, the target customers will be the people in the millennials group from Ho Chi Minh City because this is the biggest population in the country, with about 9.166 people in 2021 (General Statistics Office 2021), and the most international tourist arrivals in the city in 2019, about 8.619 million tourists (Vietnam Tourism Annual Report 2020, 56). The international airport also is in the city; therefore, the number of foreign tourists is potential. Thirdly, the geographic constraint of the food places will be chosen located in the Southwest area, of Vietnam. Another target is that the places do not exceed 200 km away from Ho Chi Minh City to avoid tiredness that may happen from customers, as well as affect the selecting of other places. This focus is to serve the narrowing down of customer segments.

The study also will present the cases from Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia about their awareness of the developing trend of food tourism and many studies of this area have been made in their countries to promote the tourism industry there. This implies that Vietnam, a country in the region, also may encourage its tourism by efficiently focusing on the branch of the industry, food tourism, to achieve many goals from these trends: economy, sustainability, and social preservation.

The full name of the commissioner is UGO Travel Service company Limited. The company is a small size, has been operating in the tourism industry since 2016. Its target customers are groups demanding in experiencing memorable moments together, and companies focusing on team building for their staff. The company is led by youth persons who wish to offer new trends to customers. Particularly, they have been running trips of trekking and camping presented on its website <https://www.ugotravel.vn/>. Therefore, they have been demanding tours like food tour to bring new experience to their clients.

2 Food tourism

It may be that consuming food is one of the most essential things for a human being (Capaldi, 1996), therefore 16 prime Hospitality and Tourism journals have studied about 5333 food-related papers over 40 years, from 1976 to 2016 (Okumus, Koseoglu & Ma 2018). Indeed, since the late 18th century, the view of food has changed, it is appreciated more than just a thing of nourishment for most people all over the globe (Stanley & Stanley 2014).

To get more oriented and achieve the project in implementation, it is crucial to comprehend food tourism definition and similar terms having the same idea. Other phrases being equivalent to food tourism are cuisine, culinary tourism, food and tourism, food consumption, food production, food tourism, gastronomy tourism, and gastronomy and tasting tourism (Ellis & al. 2018, 251); and gourmet tourism (López-Guzmán & Sánchez-Cañizares 2012); and agriculture tourism, food offering and destination choices, food festivals, and food and sustainability tourism (Okumus & al. 2018).

World Food Travel Association (s.a) defines "Food tourism is the act of traveling for a taste of place in order to get a sense of place". Meanwhile S. Everett (2016) stated that food tourism can be understood as the motive of the journey is to visit both prime and secondary food makers, food outlets, fairs, and particular places where actions of trying and practice take place (Hall & Mitchell 2001, 308). From the motivation-based perspective, Smith and Costello (2009) defined food as an essential source that stimulates travellers to travel and come to a place devotedly to the special food provided. On the other hand, from the activity-based angle, food tourism is defined as the participation of travellers in the association with food activities taking place during the process, and it can be more related to cultural circumstances (Ellis & al. 2018, 254). The difference between the activity-based from the motivational one is that the motivation-based is more intrinsic than the activity aspect (Ellis & al. 2018, 255).

Culinary tourism in general is a process of looking for distinctive and unforgettable moments, creating a linkage between regional food customs and travellers' experiences (Green & Dougherty 2008, 150). Particularly, culinary happens in the ambiance of culture and society in which food is prepared following a style and consumed. Conceptually, culinary tourism is as tourism routes/trails taking place in a period of time of buying and experiencing local food (drinks included), or the watching or learning of food preparation typically illustrating a notable motivation and activity (López-Guzmán & Sánchez-Cañizares 2012).

"Cuisine tourism or gourmet tourism refers to those travellers, who specifically care about foods on journey, thus a lot of destinations everywhere take advantage of local cuisine as a special thing to attract travellers to come to their places (Thirachaya & Patipat 2019.). Indeed, regional cuisine

allurement considerably put up tourists' awareness of destination beauty (Guan & Jones 2015). Cohen and Avieli (2004) correspondingly stated this view that by trying the area cordon bleu art, the travellers generate a closer connection with the destination and engage in a different part much more than mere observers.

Gastronomy was discussed by Hegarty and O'Mahony (1999) that it is the destination of food that happens inside the society through the living way and established customs of local people. According to Soeroso and Turgarini (2020), gastronomy tourism is closed to characteristics of cultures, people's doings in choosing ingredients and after that seasoning and trying, getting a sense, serving, and finally enjoying the food. Therefore, gastronomy gets tourists to engage in the cultural and customed legacy of destinations by trying, experiencing, and buying both food and ancillary services (Ellis & al. 2018, 257).

2.1 Food tourism trends

Haaga-Helia Service Experience Laboratory (2019) stated the eight trends as of 2020: higher conscious about sustainable food trend, increase in authenticity and locality, diverse food events and festivals, focus on food stories & storytelling, growth in micro food trips, going alone but eating together, more multigenerational food travel, technology-fueled food travel.

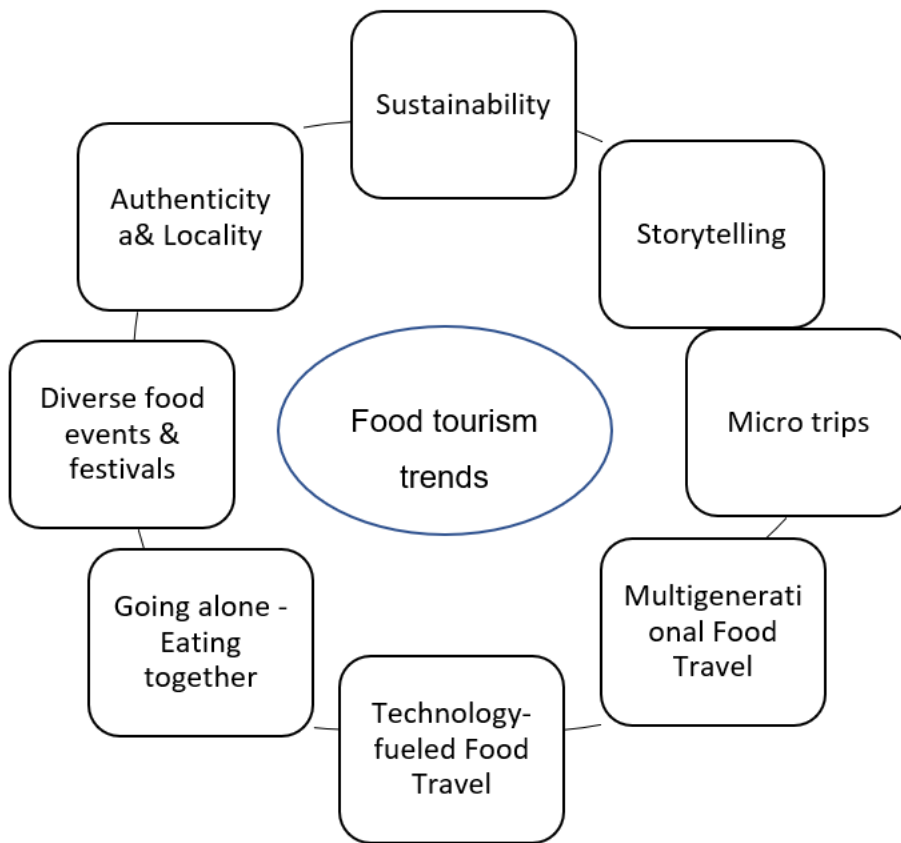


Figure 1. Food tourism trends 2020 (adapted from Lab8 2020)

The author will focus on four trends out of them (sustainability, authenticity and locality, food stories & storytelling, and growth in micro food trips) to build the food tour as a final product.

Sustainability

The first trend is sustainability which most attraction places have been caring of the three angles of the steady development triangle: economy, society, and environment (LAB8 2020). All the activities related to tourism influence the locality, environment, and incomes and expenses of the local community, thus sustainability has been fundamental for approaching tourism, and Carruthers al. (2015), applying the case County of Cork as a particular case, suggested gastronomy tourism as a practical application of sustainability on the island of Ireland following economic, environmental, and social factors. The environmental factor involves the influence that making use of food in the area contributes to sustainable tourism and sustainable societies, helping local people, farmers, and food makers to stay in their habitats and keep them protected in that environment for the upcoming age (Quigley, Connolly, Mahon & Iomaire 2019, 210), this encourages tourism and food tourism have been integrated into rural policy-making, recognizing not only the bigger economic

function of non-agricultural actors in agriculture economies but also the developing significance of environmental and sustainability importance (the case of Ireland) (Hall & Gosling 2016).

Furthermore, the gastronomy sustainable trend is received by travellers and will be a progressively significant element in the process of choosing of possible visitors (Niedbala, Jeczmyk, Steppa & Uglis 2020). Thus, it can be enhanced that tourists who opt for healthy and sustainable eating during their vacations may find the motivation to practice those actions also as they are back to their daily routine (Bertella 2020). This motive can generate awareness by the travellers who plan and support green food menus and immerse themselves in different sustainable activities (Miller, Merrilees & Coghlan 2015).

Authenticity and locality

The second trend is authenticity and locality. Many tourist places have gripped these elements to accent the cuisine instead of internationalization (LAB8 2020). It is a trend because the local foods firstly impress tourists by providing them a taste of food and place a pull in their mind to come back the place later (Thirachaya & Patipat 2019, 3). The locality is usually connected with the sustainability of tourism which globally determines food and producing food from the local preservation and identification as the competitive advantage (Ellis & al. 2018, 256). Also, this says that the prominence of producing and supplying food from the local food tourism and transferring food experiences are pointed up (Broadway 2017).

Meanwhile, Sparks et al. (2005) recommended that the authenticity of the experience' (p. vi) is substantial to increase competitiveness in food and beverage tourism. Authenticity and food are connected by culture, history, and other aspects of a destination. With the tourists devoted to food, it is important to be aware of the origin and legacy, the source of where, how and whom of food generation (Ellis & al. 2018, 257). Furthermore, to get a growth of local authenticity, food plays a crucial role in increasing traveling memorable moments for tourists when they are enjoying the destination's attraction (Jameson 2010). Accordingly, travellers have been searching the authenticity as the priority they desire for engaging in the culture going along with the feeling of reminiscent memories connected with the Slow Food and Slow Cities concepts (de la Barre & Brouder, 2013, 148). They seek authentic experience over consuming regional materials, learning the ways cooking, experiencing preserved customs, and enjoying the end products in the destinations (López-Guzmán & Sánchez-Cañizares 2012).

From the producer's point of view, the allurements is transmitted from the locality, if a product is made by the people in the region, they will economically get benefited from it. This, in turn, encourages them to conserve and take care of those local values, because that will also secure their

earnings (Niedbala & al 2020). Therefore, Mulcahy (2019a) pointed out eight important achieved factors for gastronomy tourism experiences in which two out of eight emphasizes authenticity and locality as the bases from the outset of the tour, and then clinch the well-founded standards of regional food customs.

Food stories and storytelling

The third trend is food stories and storytelling. Based on the food tourism strategy, narratives are the next drawing to hit the tourist's experiences (LAB8 2020). Local narratives may prompt and encourage traveler's care and emotions (and also happens with habitants) to increase their good moments in the happening atmosphere (Bassano, Barile, Piciocchi, Spohrer, Iandolo & Fisk, 2019). Together the element such as local producers, restaurants, hotels, wine producers can supply an all-in tour or a trail with proposed points where the travellers may comprehend the hidden story in the culinary as well as gastronomy and acquire it (Andersson, Mossberg & Therkelsen 2017, 4). To emphasize this trend with millennials, Naumovska (2017) stated that the author should use a storytelling in terms of using words and written copies to challenge their actions.

The insight of taking storytelling as a tool of communication to lead a cluster of travelers is considered as a natural result of replacing in today customers' mindset not only for solely entertainment, watching landscapes and nature but also collecting knowledge about other aspects of establishment, culture, people, and characters of a place that they are limited to find out themselves (Larsen & Therkelsen 2009)

From the provider's point of view, story toolkits and most recently Taste the Island toolkits and workshops enabled communities to improve their own food and drinks experiences and, with initiatives such as 'Taste of Place', to promote local food and boost the local economy through the multiplier effect (Yeoman al. 2015).

Short tours

The fourth trend is that short tours are more popular everywhere. Booking.com statistics showed that 53% of tourists spend more weekend time off on traveling in 2019 (LAB8 2020). Recently, the Vietnamese government has usually made continuous days off when the working day is between days off, to urge people to consume and entertain during their break.

Millennials are going on "micro-cations. According to the White paper Allianz Global Assistance (2019), the Vacation Confidence Index revealed that 72% of millennials make a vacation that prolonged no more than four nights within year 2018, in comparison to 69% of Gen X and 60% of Boomers. Another number strongly show this trend is that 29% of millennials was not only making

those trips shorter, but also making it more often, and from those asked people, they did it three times as the minimum frequency. In addition, the limited time of holidays at work encouraged them to choose short and quick tours.

2.2 Food tourism in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia

In this chapter, the author is going to present the food tourism cases of the neighbour countries: Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia in the Southeast Asia Region. The content will describe how the governments of those country have been aware of this food tourism trend and it has contributed to the development of their tourism sector for recent years. The content will also present some activities organized by the governments that support their food reputation which finally encourage back to tourism (Anderson & Law 2012).

2.2.1 Food tourism in Thailand

It is undeniable that tourism contributes significantly to the Thai economy (Lunchaprasith & Macleod 2018), before the pandemic, the number of international tourist arrivals in Thailand from 2015 to 2019, particularly year 2019 got 39,8 million of inbound travellers (Tourist arrivals 2021). From that amount of those tourists in 2019, Thailand produced around 15.36 billion US Dollar in only the tourism sector. This is equivalent to 3.0 percent of its the gross domestic product and roughly 52 percent of all international tourism receipts in Southeast Asia (World Data 2022). Indeed, Thailand has been famous about tourism in the world, Bhumibhamorn and Visuthismajarn (2019) stated that Thai food owns a big notoriety about food because of its attractiveness and delicious tastes, besides, it is also well-know about living eating style and natural ingredients. Berno, Dentice and Wisansing (2019) also mentioned that” Thailand has created a culinary brand identity”. Indeed, the savors of Siam (the old name of Thailand) food are famous around the world, although there is a lot of food that is advertised globally with the special tasty cuisine from the locals (Muangasame & Park 2019).

However, another opinion from Bhumibhamorn and Visuthismajarn (2019) this country has been new in culinary tourism but has the potential to rise the comprehension and swap the knowledge between local habitats and traveling people. Lunchaprasith and Macleod (2018) also admitted that Thailand has been prevailing in tourism but not achieved its potential about its cuisine. Although there are still some various stances about food tourism in Thailand, it has proved that Thailand is one of the developed tourism industries in the world. Thailand has created many campaigns continuously such as Thailand - kitchen of the world; Amazing Thai Food; Thailand splash and spicy festival, the purpose of all of these campaigns is to draw the attention from international tourists and to increase their knowledge of Thai cuisine (Hohgi, Nagai & Iriyama 2014, 6–7). Particularly,

the recent event named “Khao Thai”, which means Thai rice, was organized in 2020 and 2021 by Thai Tourism Authority spread out over media to arouse the taste of Indian tourism market (The Nation Thailand 2022). Likewise, the Thailand splash and spicy festival event desired to demonstrate the diversification and the distinction of Thai cuisine to tourist around the world, endeavored to support businesses in the industry of tourism quickly recuperate from occurring political disturbance (Hohgi & al. 2014, 7).

2.2.2 Food tourism in Malaysia

Government of Malaysia in 2015 stated that that tourism area in Malaysia is the second main economic actor after production. With the rise amount of tourist arrivals from 25.72 million in 2015 to 26.76 million in 2016, tourism has now become most crucial field in Malaysia. However, earlier, Aziz & Zainol (2009) assessed that the image of Malaysia as an enormous cuisine tourism destination is still mystify as it was neglected by the image of beautiful nature, history places and high-rise buildings. Mohamed (1994) stated that, to catch the level of high organization in food tourism attractions like Singapore and Thailand, Malaysia still significantly runs after to be equal to them (Karim Chua & Salleh 2009).

Since 2019, Malaysia has demonstrated its plenty of cuisines which is felt peaceful and enjoyable living ways of different groups of people over variety of food festivals, food tours, Malaysian Kitchen, and other food regarding events that were held every year by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Arts, Malaysia. Accordingly, more global tourists have been attractive by flavor of Malaysian cuisine, and designed their break time to come to Malaysia, because it is among the most wonderful vacation destinations for “Asia’s greatest cuisines meet and mingle” (Omar, Ab Karim, Isa & Omar 2020). Therefore, Malaysia has been recognized as a food paradise and known as the best tourism destination that serves varieties of food to local and international tourists

2.2.3 Food tourism in Indonesia

Department of Indonesia Tourism has been applying “culinary” term to express a tourism that is according to gastronomy in order to set down it as a model. However, Indonesia is not good enough to compete to other tourisms around the world (Soeroso & Turgarini 2020.). In 2013, Blanke and Chiesa (2013) stated that the competitiveness index of Indonesia tourism just stood the 70th in the ranking of 140 nations surveyed. For Asia-Pacific area, Indonesia's ranked 12th, below Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand (Soeroso & Susilo 2014)

Although its this field is not as competitive as others in the region, the numbers in the industry have been improved encouragingly. The tourism field presented increasing up to 4,8 percent, which was 4,5 percent in year 2018, of Gross Domestic Product. Some actors in the contribution of Gross

Domestic Product were food, accommodation, and food and drinks operator in small enterprises had an inspiring grow (Soeroso & Turgarini 2020). One of the uniqueness of Indonesia is success of culinary, comprising the sense of food and culinary preparing (Soeroso & Susilo 2014).

A trip, which is devoted to food and drinks, becomes a tourism inspiration element for traveling. This tourism is incorporated in classification of culture (NIOS 2018) and associated with “food tourism” or “tasting tourism” (Soeroso & Turgarini 2020). In 2019, accommodation operator and food & beverages branch, as key actors of tourism operation, rose 5.8% (y.o.y). This good growing was occupied by food and drink’s part (6.9%), whereas the growth of accommodation operator part accurately reduced 1.3%. Possibly, it was so because of disturbance affected by the usage of technology in lodging operator in tourist attraction which could shrink the hotel possession (Revindo al. 2020). Generally, the accomplishment of food and drinks is remarkable regarding tourism contribution in the country that is still necessarily helped and facilitated to stay on the developing track (Soeroso & Turgarini 2020)

2.3 Food tourism in Vietnam

Philip Kotler, in his trip to Vietnam, used to say, “Vietnam should be called “the world’s kitchen” (Nguyen 16 December 2014). That says that Vietnam is a country of food with a diversity of many kinds of ingredients that may promote culinary and gastronomy tourism. Having been aware of these advantages, the Vietnamese government has been conducting a Strategy for Tourism Development in Vietnam to 2020, Vision 2030, focusing on enhancing quality products that are centered on beach tourism, cultural tourism, and nature-based tourism (Environmentally and Socially Responsible Tourism Capacity Development Program 2014). One of those three pillars of tourism is a cultural factor which plays an important role in the above definitions of food tourism and other terms. Through those efforts, Vietnam has achieved some good results and recognized by awarded by international and regional associations. Particularly, it was honored as World’s leading Heritage Destination, Asia’s Leading Cultural Destination, and Asia’s Leading Culinary Destination (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism 2019, 11).

Vietnam has been popular with ecotourism by taking advantages and competitiveness of the features of every region. The Southwest area focuses on its ecosystem with the network of interlaced rivers, immense fruits gardens, and the floating markets (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism 2022). In practice, the provinces in the Mekong Delta have actively built ecotourism routes from local people with many specialties such as picking from fruit gardens, going around canals and rivers on traditional wooden boats, enjoying local music chants, experiencing cuisine: folk, handicraft village products, learn the colloquial tom of the people living near the rivers, the fish catching, and visiting the isles on rowing boats with locals.

Also, some provinces have been aware of the food tours in their cities and famous places. Particularly, on May 2022, Hai Phong Tourism Department has launched a food tour map that received positive signs from locals, domestic tourists, especially generation Z of the country (Lao Dong 2022). Another typical province is Can Tho which take its advantages of food specialties such as fruit gardens of local people or experiencing storytelling about fish farming from local farmer experts (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism 2022).

3 Food trails

To understand what food trails in an area is, it is crucial to comprehend the role of the local food in the trails. Food is a typical thing of customs, narratives, and representations, and it conceptualize the gastronomy of a place as well as a mean of interconnection between locals and tourists. Therefore, food helps experiences culture and whereby emphasize the authenticity (Ellis & al. 2018, 261.). Anderson & Law (2012) raised that regional food can support attracting tourists to a place, engaging travelers experiences, so that encourage competitive advantages of a region.

Similarly, Hall, Sharples, Mitchell, Macionis, and Cambourne (2004, 26) stated that food and tourism sector play one of the remarkable roles in the growth of agriculture economy of a place. In the larger spectrum, the system of food and beverages is the evidence to the significance of the local food around the world (Hall & al. 2004, 32).

Stanley and Stanley (2018) defined that a food trail means the area may create the popularity of the destination of providing good food, in addition to offer to travelers good preparative choices of lodging and eatery places. Similarly, supported partly by Failte Ireland's 'Place on a Plate' initiative, food trails have developed to dominate in Ireland recently, with tourists welcomed to track an elaborated tour through a town, a county, or a region, taking in various gastronomies during the trip over visiting local food places and craft makers. Food shops are supported to offer regional products to the customers (Broadway, 2017). Producers are selling specialties and good quality food directly to the travelers and locals' consumers in agricultural markets more preferably favor than in supermarkets or big wholesalers chain stores (Navarro & Medina 2018).

The trail is a compound outcome that requires mutual interconnection between separated palpable and impalpable elements, and one of the most important things for making a trail is the harmonized operation of those mutual actors (Leal 2015). A more specific interpretation, food trails and gourmet tours similarly depend on the collaboration of several stakeholders such as regional makers, dining places, accommodations, alcoholic producers, and breweries and can be on a specific type of product, such as beer, or on a popular regional dish (Andersson, Mossberg & Therkelsen 2017). Antonioli Corigliano (2002) stated trails are often discussed in linking local raw materials to other natural and cultural traveling sources to establish in use of regional tourism. Out of those points, food trails require to enhance collaboration between food producers and tourism operators within specific places to develop economy of a region (Broadway 2017, 472).

From the general management, food trails are an example of a geographic strategy that include various participant factors and one of the key strategies built and grown by organizations taking care of food tourism development (Londoño & Medina 2017, 96). Before that, Carrasco and Puebla

(2009) stated that the success in regional development is not only depending on contribution of enterprises, but also the participation of society and institution involvement which is preserved in a particular unit of society.

From the same point, Wood (2001) stated the relationship between food and tourism should be blended into an area economic strategic growth by optimizing the social and economic connect between food makers and tourism sector. Hall & al. (2004, 28–29) raised some solution for that strategy such as: reusing the financial funds in the financial chain, for instance, the accommodations and restaurants can should buy and encourage local materials and products, they also are customers of local financial institutions; highlighting regional identification and reliability in marketing strategy by raising the generating place and consistently support the consumption of those places of food maker; delivering foods directly from farm production to customers or through local events and fair markets.

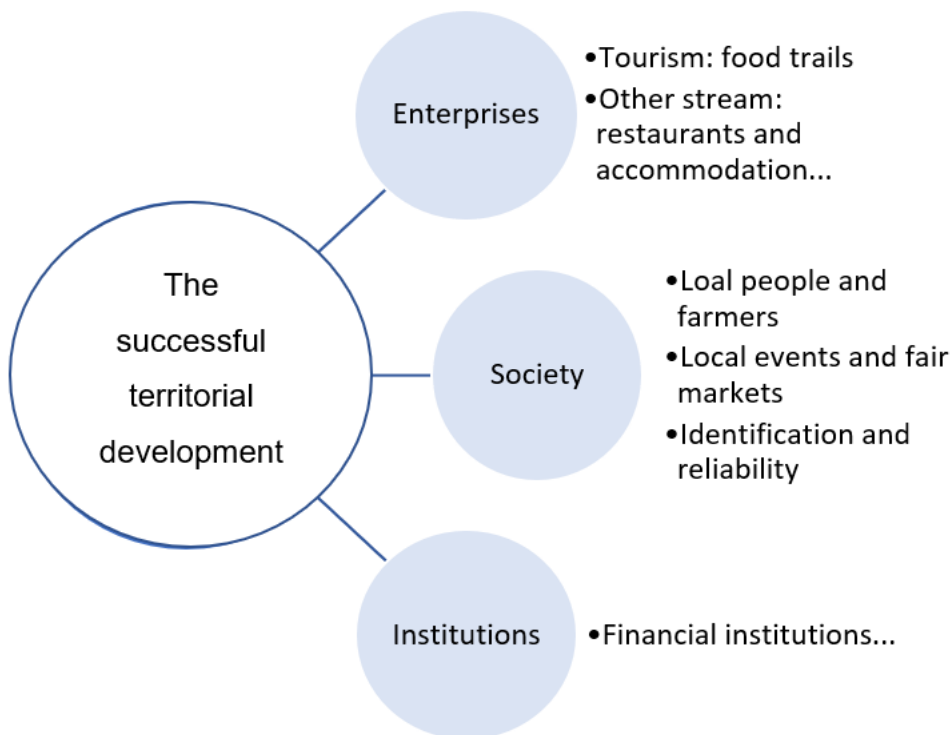


Figure 2. Food trails in the territorial development

3.1 Southwest region of Vietnam

The Mekong Delta (Vietnamese: Đồng bằng Sông Cửu Long, lit. 'Nine Dragon River Delta' or simply Đồng Bằng Sông Mê Kông, 'Mekong River Delta'), also known as the Western Region (Vietnamese: Miền Tây) or South-western region (Vietnamese: Tây Nam Bộ), is the region in the

Southwestern Vietnam where the Mekong River approaches and empties into the sea through a network of distributaries. Located adjacent to the city. Ho Chi Minh City, Mekong River Delta is a particularly important economic-cultural area of the southern region (Ministry of Culture, Sport & Tourism Vietnam National Administration of Tourism 2016).

The Mekong Delta has a exclusive terrain with the big flatlands and islands, filled by the fertile alluvium of the Mekong River with 2 main branches, the Tien and Hau rivers, fruit gardens are abundant throughout the year, combined with traditional folk festivals with unique cultural identities and history. From those natural features and customs, the tourism sector in the region has been oriented in operation embedded eco-tourism and garden tourism around the Rivers (Phuong 2019, 1364).

Similarly, Le (2015, 16–17) stated that Mekong Delta, with its unique biosphere region in the world, will be a new destination for International tourists. The topography of the region is really typical with many interlaced rivers and canals, meeting all the factors for tourism development such as forests, mountains, sea, islands, and many famous landmarks in ecological regional features that have given the area a distinct tourism nuance.

A statistic in 2014 made by multi-provinces in the region showed that among the services in tourism in the Mekong Delta such as accommodation, transportation, shopping, entertainment, etc., the food service still occupies a rather large role (Le 2015, 10–11). This is one of the clear signs that the Southwest area is really a potential place of food tourism as it has an enough strategic system invested by its region as mentioned above in the food trail theory. Niedbala & al. (2020) stated that culinary trails blend agricultural things and food production in the region with tourism based on the cultural custom. With the available existing cultural, agricultural and food background mentioned above, Southwest has enough elements to develop food tourism.

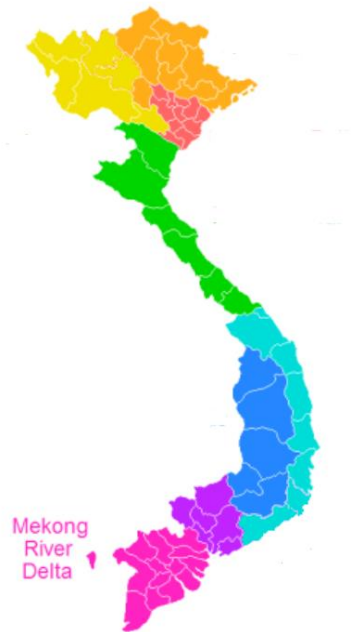


Figure 3. Map of Mekong Delta River region (adapted from Reseachgate.net)

3.2 Customers group: millennials

Nowadays, many industries have targeted millennials or generation Y as the customer segment because this group of the world is now the biggest adult cohort worldwide (World Economic Forum 2021). Tourism also focuses more on this segment, and the fact indicates that this generation travels the most in all the generations in the world, and surprisingly, sometimes they can spend more on travel than they earn (Niesel 2017).

Millennials are individuals born between 1981 and 1997, with ages ranging from 21 to 37 in 2018 (Kurz, Li & Vine 2018). However, there are many opinions about this this generation, they define this generation were born also until the end of the 2000s. Particularly, Naumovska (2017) stated that millennials or generation Y have the birth year between 1980 and 2000 and they grew up in a period of unceasing economic and international development, also the time of explosion of technology and digital.

Ketter (2021, 194) stated that millennials are the people who desire for freedom and consider travelling as the primary chance to explore the world and themselves. They also think open, love encountering and experience time with global people and nature. Part of the motive of this generation to trip is the finding new things, experience various living styles, as well as reach new destinations and achieve new understanding about the world (Ketter 2021, 194). They are also interested in authenticity, handcraft, locality from goods and they are happy to pay more for products from makers

who care social programs. In addition, they seek out the product and services having selling language which is regarding their way of living and supports their idealized self (Naumovska 2017.)

4 Process description

The figure 12 below is showcasing the process of making this thesis in steps. In the late summer 2022, I had contacted with some relationship in Vietnam and got the commissioner for a tour as a company, UGO traveling company. In the first meeting with the tour executive manager in the early of September 2022, I found out that they have been demanding a new tour in Southwest region. I was presenting them about food tourism trend and getting their excitement with the trend. We were discussing and agreeing with a new tour also in that meeting is that the product would be a tour of 3 days and 2 nights in the Mekong Delta River area, intended for food and beverages.

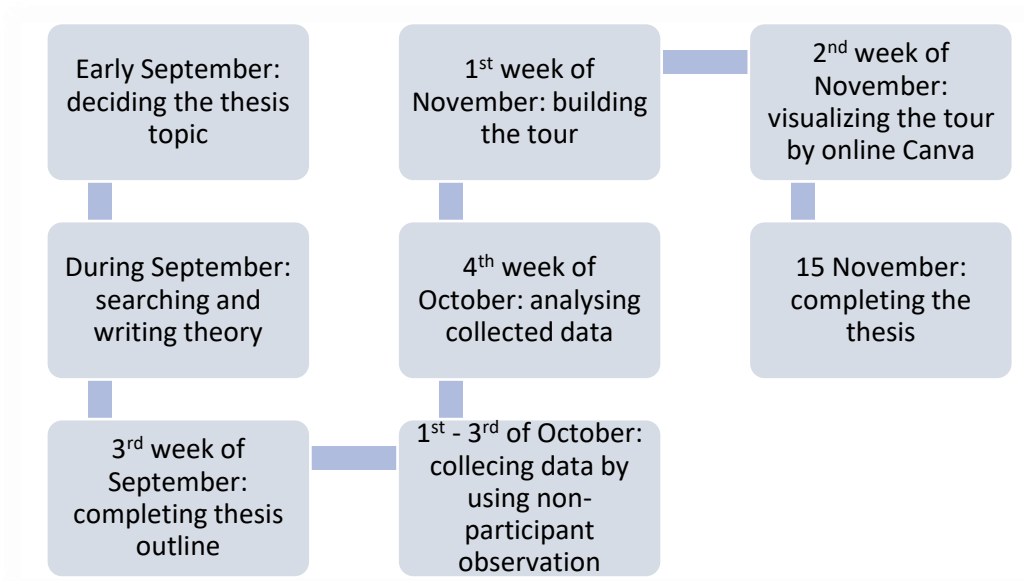


Figure 4. The timeline process of making this thesis

My aim is that the thesis will be completed before Christmas 2022, so that I set the intensive timeline for this product. The product was built in two and a half months starting from the beginning of September to the middle of November 2022. During the first four-week in September, I was focusing on gathering the theoretical framework which took a lot of time. Fortunately, taking advantages from the course Research and Development, I have had already some materials that helped for writing; thus, the thesis outline was ready in the third week. Meanwhile, I also searched for the customers should be targeted. After reading some characters of people groups. In addition, I am myself in the generation Y, also call millennials, really interested in this trend of tourism, so I chose this group as focused customers. After discussing with commissioners, we also narrow down the target group with just the millennials from Ho Chi Minh City. The non-participant observation step was started from the beginning of October. During the first three-week in October of gathering data, I applied the non-participant observation technique by using Google search function, from the

two observation tables (presented below), the information was collected and put into the excel table that I was using later to filter destinations. The destinations were chosen if they are the most popular (presented the most in those current tours) and certainly also satisfy the criteria tables. Then I use the keywords presented in the part 4.4 to search for special food and spots where offer the food. I spent two weeks from the fourth week of October to the first week in November on analysing the information from the selected spots by reading the content again, and if the spots get more positive feedbacks, they would be finally chosen for the tour. After that, I built the tour from the selected spots, and visualizing them as a poster by using online Canva application.

4.1 Methodology

In this thesis, I applied the qualitative research method and non-participant observation to collect and select data. Popularly, the qualitative method is used in the studies of collecting systematically, ordering, describing, and interpreting the data created from conversations, observations, or materials (Grbich, Kitto & Chesters 2008, 243).

“The qualitative includes the techniques of interviewing, observing, and document analysis” (Grbich & al. 2008, 243) in which observation can be applied as the main approach or together with other methods to complement qualitative in a study (Ciesielska, Boström & Öhlander 2018, 34).

Ciesielska & al. (2018) also classified two typical types of observation techniques: participant and non-participant observation. In the participant observation, researchers are trying to be a part of a particular event or context to have internal knowledge of interconnection, relationship and they wish to observe for a longer period. In the non-participant observation, the researchers endeavor to figure out the relationship and interaction in a different way without popular estimation (Ciesielska & al. 2018, 34.).

The author chose the observation technique for this study because the author was staying in Finland and could not visit the region as Ciesielska & al. (2018) stated that non-participating observation is the way that observer is not in physical contact with the place. In addition, nowadays, travel operators and agencies express information about tours, places, and foods on the internet quite sufficiently. However, the author's relatives are living in some provinces in the Southwest, the author sometimes visited them, sought materials like poultry, fish in the ponds and seafood in the rivers, also went to traditional markets, cooked, and finally enjoyed the results with them in the house, in the tent nearby the rice fields or river with full of memorable experiences. Therefore, by observing information on the internet, the author may recognize and consider the place based on those experiences and knowledge.

4.2 Analysis method: Content analysis

"Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inference from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff 2018, 24). Content analysis is also used to strain a big quantity of information in an organized and systematic way (Stemler 2000). Based on the definition, he requires that the procedure of observing (choosing, reading, and analyzing texts) that information eventually meet the external demands (Krippendorff 2018, 25). From this angle, the author can give some inference from the observing texts, and hence reflect on the studied concepts and themes, and finally choose or ignore places or stops.

Luo (2019) also clearly stated how to deploy content analysis that researchers methodically gather data from collected texts from different sources such as books, newspapers, web content, pictures, interviews ... by identify, classify, or code words, themes, and concepts within the expressing communication and after that analyze, summarize the outcome. In this paper, the concepts and themes related to food tourism and its trends presented in the theoretical part will be the linking tool with the observe data for selecting places and points. Based on those concepts and themes, the author created two tables of criteria to choose the destinations and spots.

The aim of using this method is also to create new thoughts and grow the comprehension of a particular object, and to achieve a wider interpretation of that (Moldavska & Welo 2017, 745). From this perspective, the author expected to suggest some ideas in the serving way of food at local places to increase the authenticity and locality as mentioned in the theoretical framework.

4.3 Creating the observation table and setting up the criteria of the chosen spot

The aim was going to design a tour with a duration of 3 days 2 nights as the demand from the commissioning party, because short tours have been popular and especially fit to millennials target as mentioned. This duration has been one of the options of short holiday options that can fit to various customers. Another reason of the goal is to design a tour with around ten spots which would be divided into three days. Thus, if the duration of a place is too long, it may affect the next place. In this thesis, I used criteria below to select destinations from existing tours from many current traveling operators so that the selected destinations would be totally focused on the main objective as well as the sub-objectives of the thesis. The main objective of this thesis is going to create a food tour in Southwest area, Vietnam for millennials. To narrow down the geographic customer, I have chosen Ho Chi Minh City as the main target to focus on the market. Also, the three sub-objectives below navigate the observation process:

- The food route will catch the food trends around the world that includes sustainability, authenticity and locality, food stories and storytelling, and short tours.

- This food tourism trail will help customers know more about the local food culture and experience true food tourism in the Mekong Delta area, in Vietnam
- This food tour is one of the ideas to travel operators connecting with local households who can contribute to the customer experience and earn economic benefits for themselves.

The author created two levels of criteria. Firstly, the table of primary criteria (table 1) were built according to the main topics: location, duration, target group, food trends, and others. Secondly, the table of secondary criteria (table 2 below) were built based on the definitions and trend explanations from the theoretical part. The first column in the first table is the description of tours about duration and price of the tour and destinations in the trip. For the duration, when I used the keyword “tour of 3 days 2 night”, it has been already satisfied the trend of short trip and somewhat limited the searching results. At first, I looked at the duration of the tour and the second criterion right below to pick up and collect all the tours that satisfy the length of the holiday.

The second column is about location that is determined from one destination to the next destination, or it is also the distance between two continuous destinations in the tour, so that customers will not feel too tired as travel from one point to next point. The distance criterion is around 80 kilometres. This location criterion is also about starting point of the tour, this thesis was narrowed down the target customers who are from Ho Chi Minh City, therefore, tours start from Sai Gon would be chosen after meeting the first criterion.

Target group is appeared in the third column about millennials who collect life experiences is the most favor and live a valuable and blissful moments memorably over a range of experiencing time (Ketter 2021, 193). The fourth column is about food trends which are food served during trips and activities according to the culture and customs. The last column, I left it as others if related information should be noted when I was observing.

Table 1. The primary criteria for selecting destinations

Tour de- scription (price, dura- tion of 3 days & 2 nights, destinations)	Location (Starting from Ho Chi Minh City/Sai Gon; max 80 km from the pre- vious place)	Target group (millennials target, custom- ers from Ho Chi Minh City/Sai Gon)	Food trends (food served, related-culture activities)	Other
Tour de- scription (price, dura- tion of 3 days & 2 nights, destinations)	Location (Starting from Ho Chi Minh City/Sai Gon; max 80 km from the pre- vious place)	Target group (millennials target, custom- ers from Ho Chi Minh City/Sai Gon)	Food trends (food served, related-culture activities)	Other

The secondary criteria table are the most important elements for this product, thus the author had to consider the descriptive content of the places as well as reviews from online customers for those trips to select the suitable places according to the definitions and themes of the route. For the first criterion, certainly I chose the food spots based on the definition of the food tourism which are the places of food consuming in the surrounding environment concerning the cultures and customs of the region. For the second column, the theme will be chosen unlike previous ones to keep tourists' curiosity and experience new feelings. The theme here can be food, regarding food hunting, or the ambiance where food is consumed. The third column is about sustainability, which is an indispensable element in any production from the suppliers in the fair market. Sustainable criteria can be the food place owned by locals, ingredients also gathered from regional production, or environmentally farmed or produced... therefore, spots would be selected if it satisfied those requirements of sustainability.

The fourth column is about authenticity and locality, and storytelling. The author read through the texts in those tours, then took notes the descriptive texts by using content analysis, then infer the characters of those text to connect with theory.

The fifth column is the rating or customer's reviews for spots. If there would be quite many spots all satisfying the first four criteria of the secondary table, this criterion will help the author choose two or more spots from those satisfied ones. The spots or operator of the activities have the higher rating, and the greater positive reviews or feedbacks would be chosen than less ones. The Mekong Delta area has diverse food and customers can "eat" all the way of the tour, therefore, to avoid

decreasing the “full up state” of customers, the author decided to allocate one or two spots in the morning, afternoon, and evening.

Table 2. The secondary criteria for selecting destinations

Definition	Themes	Sustainability	Food trends	Rating or customer’s reviews
Inherent in the terms of food tourism definitions/points of views	The theme of a place will opt differently from the theme of the previous one.	Food and producing food from locals, economically benefiting local habitats, and also embracing the environment	Expressing authenticity and locality; stories behind foods; storytelling of the food and region custom.	Rating from travel agencies; the number of reviews from tourists

4.4 Googling, selecting, and expressing the food places

This is the phase that took me a lot of time. I started observing step from the beginning of October to the end of the month, reading information from those existing tours, and blogs & reviews from tourists and local people who experienced the local food places, both in English and Vietnamese. Then I observed the common food and places from that information. I use the long keyword “tour miền Tây 3 ngày 2 đêm” which means Southwest tour of 3 days 2 nights” in English to search for information of existing tours; and other phrases as below to search for specialities and spots of local regions.

Table 3. Table of searching keyword list

Vietnamese	English
Đặc sản của ...	Specialities of
Ăn uống ở ...	Eat and drink in ...
Địa chỉ ăn uống ở ...	Eating and drinking addresses in ...

For the Vietnamese keyword of “tour miền Tây 3 ngày 2 đêm”, I found 56 websites of operators and agents selling the same tour duration of 3 days and 2 nights with 90 tour offers. From those 90 tours, there were 6 tours written in both English and Vietnamese. For the English keyword

“Southwest tour of 3 days 2 nights”, there were 15 websites of operators and agents selling the similar trail period of 3 days and 2 nights with also 15 offers. I made an excel file to support the observing process more easily. Those tours satisfied the criteria of tour duration and starting point from Sai Gon would be firstly chosen and put into the excel file. The most important thing was that coding the destinations from those satisfied tours into the table of destination. For instance, if a tour of 3 days and 2 nights pass through four destinations, the four destinations would be listed in order destination 1,2,3, and 4. Similarly, those tours’ destination were put into the table as below:

Table 4. Supporting table for observing destinations

Operators	URL	Tours	English	Tour code	Destination 1	Destination 2	Destination 3	Destination 4	Destination 5
du-lichthoidaiviet	https://www.dulichthoidaiviet.com/mien-tay/3-ngay/du-lich-mien-tay-3-ngay-2-dem.html	1			My Tho	Ben Tre	Can Tho	Chau Doc	Sai gon
Vietfund-travel	https://www.vietfund-travel.com.vn/tour-du-lich-mien-tay-3-ngay.html	21		vf10	My Tho	Ben Tre	Can Tho	Chau Doc	Long Xuyen
				vf11	Cai Be	Can Tho	Chau Doc	Long Xuyen	Sai gon
				vf138	My Tho	Ben Tre	Can Tho	Sai gon	
				vf253	My Tho	Can Tho	Sai gon		
				vf10.10	Chau Doc	Sa Dec	Sai gon		
				vf169	My Tho	Ben Tre	Chau Doc	Ha Tien	Sai gon
				vf44.7	My Tho	Ben Tre	Can Tho	Hau Giang	Soc Trang
				vf10.6	Can Tho	Chau Doc	Ha Tien	Sai gon	
				vf09.1	Cai Be	Can Tho	Sa Dec	Sai gon	
				vf08.1	My Tho	Ben Tre	Can Tho	Sa Dec	Sai gon
			v	vf10.5	My Tho	Ben Tre	Chau Doc	Can Tho	Sai gon
			v	vf11.5	Cai Be	Vinh Long	Chau Doc	Can Tho	Sai gon
				vf44.4	Cai Be	Can Tho	Bac Lieu	Soc Trang	Sai gon
				vf44.3	My Tho	Ben Tre	Can Tho	Bac Lieu	Soc Trang
				vf44	My Tho	Ben Tre	Can Tho	Ca Mau	Bac Lieu
				vf44.8	Cai Be	Can Tho	Hau Giang	Soc Trang	Sai gon
				vf44.1	Cai Be	Can Tho	Ca Mau	Bac Lieu	Soc Trang

				vf1232	DD Cu Chi	My Tho	Ben Tre	Sai gon	
				vf 163	Long An	Dong Thap	Chau Doc	Sai gon	
				vf334	Can Tho	Sa Dec	Vinh Long	Cai Be	Sai gon
				vf384	Ca Mau	Sai gon			
HoangKhoi	https://hoangkhoi-travel.com/tour-du-lich-mien-tay-3-ngay-2-dem-khoi-hanh-hang-ngay.html	2			My Tho	Can Tho	Chau Doc	Sai gon	

The rest of column help for statistic of operators, recording URL and tours codes. Most of the tours in Vietnamese language having at least one destination related to religious spots or concerning to historical places. The tours in English focus on the experiences of approaching local people and their activities during the journeys instead of mentioning those pagoda or history stories.

5 Mekong Delta tour of 3 days and 2 nights

5.1 Enjoying small local eateries next to traditional markets

I started use the data function of excel to filter the first destination. In common, most of the tours go through My Tho as the first destination. There were 67 offers firstly stop at the city out of 90 ones, this is understandable that the easiest and most convenient route to travel by car from Ho Chi Minh City (old name: Sai Gon) to the Southwest region is Trung Luong highway. The old street National Street 1A is a narrower road and go through some busy and crowded downtowns which takes longer traveling time. the distance from South Sai Gon to the centre of My Tho City is about 70 kilometres, it meets the location criterion. I decided to select My Tho will be the first place on the tour as many companies' selection, this is beneficial for both customers and operators about time and fuel cost. Then I read through the description of those filtered tours, most of them stop at the famous rest stops that have the big parking lots and can serve hundreds of customers at the same time. They certainly offer speciality food to customers; however, it is difficult for customers to feel as a local because they are not surrounded by the local people, listened conversations from the locals around. Therefore, I was close to the first observing table, and continued searching the food trends and also focus on millennials group who have open mind thinking and like experienced moments (Ketter 2021, 194). I googled the familiar eateries where residents usually go for by using the keywords “Đặc sản của My Tho” and “Địa chỉ ăn uống ở My Tho”. By using those keywords for food places, and I found out three famous dishes from three eatery places much mentioned with good reviews as below:

Table 5. Food names in My Tho destination

Vietnamese	English	Eatery places
Hủ tiếu Mỹ Tho	My Tho noodles	Tam Lai
Cháo cá lóc rau đắng	Snakehead fish porridge and bitter herbs	Chao Ca Loc Cho Vong Nho (beside traditional market)
Bánh bèo	Beo cakes	Cho Hang Bong (beside traditional market)

I selected the three spots above because they are local places where are well-known by locals, and they often dine out there, and certainly the dishes are delicious. I chose 2 places beside traditional market because it is the exclusive market type in Vietnam where usually local people brought their food that they plant or farm themselves to market for selling. Thailand, a neighboring country,

also has this type of market. The traditional market is a group of old-style food shops and convenient stores from the region people because the customs gastronomy offers a special atmosphere to travellers (Lunchaprasith & Macleod 2018). The successful application of the conversion of old trading food and stuffs places into traveling points in the middle region of Thailand in the early 21st century has encouraged the procreation of traditional markets over the nationwide. Many traditional markets operate not only as cultural spots but are also about food tourism (Sakdiyakorn & Sivarak 2015.). Enjoying breakfast in the atmosphere of this type of market, tourists will see and feel how busy, crowded and noise of talking, bargaining of both sellers and consumers. They greatly have characters of locality and authenticity. In addition, all the three are owned by native people there. Customers on the tour can also have a chance to visit and go shopping in the markets as locals.

For these three spots, the operator can combine whether Beo cakes at Hang Bong market and My Tho noodles, or Snakehead fish porridge and bitter herbs and My Tho noodles for a tour. The My Tho noodles is appeared in both options because when I searched with the phrase "What is the most special food in My Tho", it resulted in My Tho Noodles.

5.2 Observing the traditional manual production of speciality

I continued observing those 67 tours, and 54 of them pass by Ben Tre City belong to the same name province where is just few kilometers away from My Tho. The province is eminent with coconut trees and the products made from them. I decided to select this destination because it is satisfied the location criterion. Once again, I used the keywords "Đặc sản của Ben Tre" and "Địa chỉ ăn uống ở Ben Tre" to google for dishes and places. The dish was appeared always in the top is that "Com dua" translated into English "coconut rice", and another speciality is "keo dua" which is "coconut candy" in English. Repeating the step of searching for places to eat those special food, the resulted websites suggested for the course of "com dua" is that "Nhà hàng nổi Bến Tre" (Bến Tre floating restaurant). This food "cơm dừa" is fortunately suitable to serve for a lunch. This spot was selected because when I was reading the texts, they describe the place with character of locality and authenticity. It is local because almost of its dishes in the menu is local food and eating on the floating floor is really a typical authentic feeling in the Southwest area where is famous for rivers and lakes.

For the coconut candy, I was searching with the keyword "keo dua Ben Tre". The result was a lot of craft workshops in the province producing coconut candies, but in the city, most of the resulted texts say that Thanh Long producer is the most well-known one. This spot quite attracted me as tourists are not only visiting the production there, but also listening the history of making this candy and there are some local stories behind related to it. This is the factory of Mr. Nguyen Van Tao who is a native local stepping up the place from his sister and has run the business until now.

Currently, this business now hires about 250 local workers in the area. When the customers come to this place, they can observe the who process of making coconut candies. Those features meet the trends as determined in the secondary criteria, and of course their theme spots are different from My Tho destination.

5.3 Hunting fish from the ponds and local-style cooking time

Keeping up the process of observing the existing tours, I found out a common route is that after My Tho and Ben Tre destinations, the next stop will be directly to Can Tho City where is 120 kilometers away from Ben Tre, or to Dong Thap province where is also 115 kilometers away from Ben Tre. This is a quite far distance that can cause tiredness to travellers and it does not satisfy the criterion of location in the first table. Thus, I re-observed the whole sample of the 90 current tours in the excel file to search for the third destination. And it had another option which is Vinh Long City, and this length between the two places is around 60 kilometers. Vinh Long City is appeared as the third destination two times in those tours. I also looked at the 15 tours in English, and there I found that there are four tours heading to Vinh Long City after My Tho destination. Then I keep the same work of searching specialties and addresses in Vinh Long City. I was observing a lot of websites and most of them listing not under 10 specialties in Vinh Long province. Their names are listed as below table:

Table 6. Food names in Vinh Long province

Vietnamese name	English name
Cá lóc nướng trui	Grilled snakehead fish
Khoai lang mắm sống cuốn lá lách	Raw sweet potato with salad dressing
Cá tai tượng chiên xù	Fried Tai Tuong fish
Bưởi năm roi	Nam Roi pomelo
Lẩu cua đồng	Crab hot pot
Cá kèo nướng ống sậy	Grilled Keo fish
Cá cóc kho nước dừa	Coc fish braised in coconut milk
...	

Then I came up with a website of a complex ecotourism zone, named Vinh Sang which has restaurants and hotel, and lots of services, ponds, lakes, and fruit gardens for the activities. When I observed the menu of the restaurants, the three courses often are taken into the menu serving tourists and I also see that there are some activities and cultural element behind the dishes. I read through the content of this place's website and was really impressed it. Firstly, there has an living typical activity of the farmers in Mekong Delta area, so called "tat muong bat ca". The activity is about travelers will walk in ponds, drain all the water in a small pond by using a container to bring water from that pond to another pond, and final hunt fish, crabs, and snails by hands or bamboo nets. To immerse in this catching, travellers will have a chance to dress the traditional clothes in the South of Vietnam, so called "Bà Ba". This is the practical activity happening in the daily live of the farmers, showing vividly authenticity and locality element, so that it will bring the memorable moments to the tourists.

One more plus point for this place is that customers can be served the first four food in the table 5 above. For the "grilled snakehead fish", participants of the activity "tat muong bat ca" can make themselves if they caught fish from there. For "raw sweet potato with salad dressing" and "fried Tai Tuong fish", they are available in the restaurant in the place. For Nam Roi pomelo, there is a story behind the name of the fruit, which is told by a staff in the zone, as tourists picking fruits in the garden. They can also enjoy the food at the tables put in the garden. Those activities and consuming food environment are clearly relating to story-telling element that can impress travelers, especially millennials.

5.4 Choosing ingredients from the floating market and cooking with locals

Then I backed to those tours again to select the fourth destination. From those tours, Can Tho be the third stop in most of the journeys as mentioned. However, due to the location criterion, Vinh Long was selected as the third place, coming to this point, I added Can Tho City without any hesitation for the next destination, where is about 55 kilometres away from the Vinh Long City to the tour. Actually, there are some more destinations satisfy the location criterion: Sa Dec is about 40 kilometres away from Vinh Long, Tra Vinh is about 78 kilometres away from the city. However, it can lead to following destinations where are too far from Sai Gon, and it can make customers tired on the way back to Ho Chi Minh city.

As mentioned in the theoretical part, food tourism is not only about food, but also the daily activities of the living styles. It is likely that everyone in the South and some people in the other regions knows about Cai Rang floating market in Can Tho and wish to visit there at least one time in their life. Being a native person in the South, I myself also know and wish to get there. And I used the phrase "where to go in Can Tho" to search for the place related to food and cultural activity, I

discovered out that visiting Cai Rang floating market is always pop-up on the top of every text in the links found. Then I read through this activity from several resulted texts. This activity can last few hours, as there are hundreds of boats in the Cai Rang River full of fruits, vegetables, and other things that sellers carry on their decks, this is the most famous activity in the region. The activity will start from the early morning about 5 am when the sky is still dark. However, the bustle of sellers and the noise from the rowing sound, calling each other among people, and the selling shouting will break the quiet atmosphere of dawn time. This is richly a cultural activity of the south-west people, as tourists participate in this type of activity through shopping, asking, and talking with sellers, they can fully have the sense of being locals. In addition, that also economically contribute to the local income and partly help them preserve the local custom. This is considered as one of the most of activities richly having the food trends of sustainability, locality and authenticity, and storytelling.

Then I looked back to the theory of food tourism and food trails which mention cooking activity as one of the typical activities of food trails. From those existing tours of 3 days and 2 nights that I have searched until now, there was no cooking activity in there. Then I used the combined word between “cooking” and the tour destination “Mekong Delta tour” to google for this activity. I googled in Vietnamese “lớp nấu ăn tour du lịch miền Tây”, there was only one result suggesting for this activity and it is included in one-day tour in Cai Be for travelers from Ha Noi (in the North of the country). However, when I googled this in English, Google gave quite many tours including this activity. The difference of the two results of this searching words in English and Vietnamese discloses that this activity perhaps get interest from international travelers much more than domestic ones.

I came up with the TripAdvisor website with the 5 best Mekong Tour cooking classes in which 2 classes in Can Tho. I read through all information of these two tours, and both of them starting from the tour with visiting floating market, and then coming to local house to have the cooking time with them. From the text, I found that this is one more activity having fully of sustainable, local and authentic elements. Besides, during the time being with the locals, tourist will be enjoying stories of the place from them. There were two spots that I could choose but depend on the fifth column in the second table of criteria, I decide to choose the cooking class of Susan which has more positive reviews than the other.

For the morning and afternoon time in Can Tho, tourists will enjoy shopping on the floating market in the morning, and participating cooking time with local during the afternoon.

5.5 Enjoying local music “Don ca tai tu” from local artists

When I was observing those current tours in Can Tho, many of them describe the activity of sitting on the yacht, having dinner and enjoy the traditional music, so called “Don ca tai tu” from local singers in the evening. This type of music is considered as the indispensable part of the mental life of Mekong Delta people. For those singers, with the prevailing practice of modern music, they are facing difficulty to keep their earnings stable, although this is the music type recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, taking this music into the tourism activities is the way of preserving local social values which is also considered as an element of the sustainable development. There is also a story of a musician who is deemed as the leader of this music. The customers on the boat can listen the story from those singers. The operator can work with the ship restaurant to make it happen. This activity can even make the the dinner memorable, especially with foreign tourists who never listen to this music before. Generally, customers are not only having dinner with fish sauce hot pot mentioned in the previous part on the yacht, but also immerse themselves in the Cai Luong / Don ca tai tu chants from local singers, and also enjoying the river landscape in the night. There is only one spot for this activity in Ninh Kieu Wharf, Can Tho City. There are four ship operators running at this point, thus the company can book time fit to the tour.

As mentioned, every morning, afternoon, and evening will at least have two spots to visit. Then I searched for another option for tourist’s choices. I used the phase related to the keywords “food places in Can Tho”, and I found another theme – food street that is different from previous themes of the tour. They are richly authentic and local elements as well as sustainability. Most of the food sellers are native speakers or long-term residents. In the food street, you can find any familiar food such as: snacks, hot pot, many types of noodles, Tam rice, types of cakes... they absorb a lot of people especially youth people in the generations X and Y coming to enjoy food and have fun with friends and family. I decide to choose the Tran Phu food street which is suggested by many reviewers on websites.

5.6 Sweetly flavours

Now I nearly come to an end of the observing process. When I looked at the map, there are several places that can be satisfactory with the location criterion such as: Soc Trang, Tra Vinh, Rach Gia, Long Xuyen, Cao Lanh and Sa Dec. I was taking a search around those places and their specialities. There are some spots in Sa Dec that are the themes of food places different from previous themes. Based on this criterion in the secondary table of criteria, I decided to select Sa Dec City in Dong Thap province where is just about 48 kilometers away from Can Tho as the last spot in the journey. Then I continued searching for special food in the city with the keyword as mentioned “Dac san va dia diem an uong o Sa Dec”

Sa Đéc has quite many similar dishes to other region about food for main meal. However, it is also well-known of sweet flavours. Using the main keywords “An vat o Sa Dec” which means “Snack and Sweet in Sa Dec”, I recognized some food and drink serving for dessert. I came up with a new theme in a spot different from previous spots. That is an ice cream old-style outlet owned by a local woman – Mrs Mai, everyone in the region calls her a closed way – Mai aunt. The locals usually come to the place to enjoy the outstanding ice cream that Mrs Mai has made the recipe by herself. Most of the ingredients are supplied from fruits in the region. Besides, the outlet also offers some snacks that are favoured by local students and youth people.

After that, I looked at lists from the resulted reviews and blogs, I saw another high-ranking spot in the list of this city - Sa Dec flour village food court. This place is very famous not only about many kinds of sweet cakes, but also the attractiveness of the place. It was built as a small village with a lot of typical details of the region, as well as decorated by tools and things for making cakes.

And the last place I added to the tour that tourists can have time to rest and share memorable with their tour mates. That is a cafeteria – Phù Sa Đỏ which is decorated from materials in the region beside some new style details. I decide to choose this spot because it gets the positive reviews much more than the others.

6 The Mekong Delta tour – Taste of the river region

In this chapter, I describe the product as the whole of the tour. The tour is designed as a brochure that includes two pages presenting the information of destinations and spots, food and activities related to food trends and some typical pictures of the spots (appendix 1). The food tour is written both in English and Vietnamese to be available for both domestic and international tourists with the main target group millennials in Ho Chi Minh city.

The tour includes 3 days and 2 nights which is considered as a short tour being a trend of time duration, so called micro-cation. In additions, the five destinations were selected from those existing tours the same duration of the product tour based on the three sub-objectives as below:

- The food route will catch the food trends around the world that includes sustainability, authenticity and locality, food stories and storytelling, and short tours.
- This food tourism trail will help customers know more about the local food culture and experience true food tourism in the Mekong Delta area, in Vietnam
- This food tour is one of the ideas to travel operators connecting with local households who can contribute to the customer experience and earn economic benefits for themselves.

Six selected destinations belong to five cities of also five different provinces in the Southwest region: My Tho, Ben Tre, Vinh Long, Can Tho, and Sa Dec. They are divided into three days and 2 nights during the journey. All the time length of traveling are estimated and taken from Google maps, it is assumed that the roads are in the normal and medium traffic.

On the first day, at 7:00 in the morning, tourists start from the Nguyen Van Linh Street in the South of Ho Chi Minh City to My Tho City which is the first destination through Trung Luong highway. It takes about 1 hour and 40 minutes to arrive My Tho center. There are three spots in this arrival: My Tho noodles at Tam Lai eatery, snakehead fish porridge and bitter herbs in Vong Nho traditional market, beo cakes in Hang Bong traditional market. Travelers will choose one of the two old trading places, and the other will be My Tho noodles at Tam Lai eatery. About 8:40, the group will get one of the two markets, they will have 2 hours for having breakfast and going shopping in and around the market. At 10:40, the group will travel to Tam Lai eatery to enjoy My Tho noodles. They will have one hour there to taste the speciality of the city.

The travelers will gather at parking lot at 11:40 to travel to the second destination – Ben Tre city. It takes about 30 minutes for traveling from Tam Lai place to the first spot in Ben Tre City – Thanh Long shop and craft workshop. Tourists will spend one and a half hours on observing the craft workshop of producing coconut candies, selecting and buying it as souvenirs. At 13:40, the group will head to the Ben Tre floating restaurant to have lunch with coconut rice – the most famous dish

of the province. It takes about 10 minutes to get to the restaurant, and the customers will have one hour to be there before getting on the car to the third destination at 14:50.

The third destination is the ecotourism area Vinh Sang in Vinh Long City. It takes about one and a half hours to get there. The tourists get there at 16:20. There, tourists will join catching fish by hands in the ponds about one and a half hours with the support from staffs in the place, then customers can either have dinner with the special food of the city in the restaurant or grill fish in the pomelo garden and enjoy picking and eating this food at the same time.

On the second day, tourists will participate in the Cai Rang floating market from 6:00 in the morning. This is the busiest time of the trade. The tourist will be traveling around the floating market while enjoying sticky rice cakes wrapped Cam leaves. This activity will end at 9:00, tourists have two hours to rest before participating cooking class with locals at their house. There, travelers will use the materials that they have bought to cook for lunch. Finishing this activity 16:00, tourists have time to dress up for the dinner on the yacht in the evening starting from 18:00. At 18, the boat is leaving from Ninh Wharf and going around the Hau River. The tourist will taste hot pot with fish sauce while immerse in the local music chants. The tourist can choose another option is that immersing themselves in the Tran Phu food street where offers a lot of familiar food and snacks of the city: hot pot, many types of noodles, Tam rice, types of cakes...

On the last day of the tour, tourists will taste sweet flavors at the local food place in Sa Dec City. The first place for this morning is Mrs. Mai's place where serves the delicious ice cream made by her own recipe and also other snacks. For lunch time, the travelers will come to the Sa dec flour food court village where offer a lot of cakes both sweet or meat fillings. There, tourist can observe the process of making and wrapping cake in the atmosphere full of rustic countryside elements decorated by local materials. After lunch time, travelers will have the relaxed time in the local cafeteria – Phu Sa Do Cafe. The space in the coffee shop is decorated with a lot of flowers planted in the city. In the middle of the afternoon, tourists get on the car and travel back to Sai Gon.

The tour was designed with different food offers consumed in various themes of environments which are presented the local, authentic, and sustainable elements to support customers understand more about food and food culture in Mekong Delta area. The activities and eatery places are also selected from the places owned by local or economically support local people and business households. This suggests some ideas of cooperation between tourism sector and local households to make this stream of tourism more sustainable.

7 Discussion

Process of generating the food tour in Mekong Delta Viet Nam is going to be appraised in this part. This chapter also recommend some suggestions of further studies about food tourism in this region. The final part of the chapter is going to be my own learning during the studying time with this product-based thesis.

7.1 Thesis process and product assessment

For the topic of this thesis, it is the product-based thesis having the commissioning party, it was well discussed about the aim and goal from the beginning. The company has had the demand of the new product in the context of the blossom of the domestic tourism during the post-pandemic time. The food tour/trails have been a trend that can take this advantage to pull the domestic tourists to encourage the tourism sector. Furthermore, food trails also have been developed in the neighbour countries where there are some similar features of weather, food, and cultures in general and thus it is potential for the tourism development in Vietnam. During the research process, the author recognized that, the designed tour could be a first tour of three days and 2 nights totally devoted to food and food activities, if so, this is a competitive advantage of the company if they would approach customers favouring the equivalent duration.

The tour was built by using qualitative method with non-participant observation technique to collect data from the current tours with the current destinations, so they are well-known with patrons and thus it might be easy to reapproach customers who have the passion with food. The selected spots based on the four trends: sustainability, locality and authenticity, storytelling, and micro-holidays are appropriate because during the collecting and analysing data, these four trends appeared the most in the descriptive content. However, this is the non – participating observation, so it lacks the sense as a visitor to appraise how authenticity and locality of a place.

The spots were chosen by analysing the content of the collected data which are shared and reviewed by the customers who travelled there and also from local people, the spots would give tourists a chance to understand more about the food culture in Mekong Delta River Region. However, during the research process, the author found out that there are quite many similar contents from observed websites. That could be that one copied the content from other for making their reviews on their blogs or website for advertisement purpose. Therefore, the numbers of reviews could be lack of the reliability. The selected places are almost from local owners. This is one of the ideas that travel companies, and those households can approach and make cooperation for the purpose of the successful territorial development of the region.

Food tourism is my field interest; thus, I am motivated during the project. The part that was taking me the most effort is theoretical framework. It was challenging to find articles and studies about the studied topic, however, I tried to gather as much as I can. There are few articles from Vietnam site because this has been new with Vietnam tourism. During the process, I have recognised that, outside Vietnam in the Southwest Asia area, the neighbor countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia have noticed and supported this tourism trend for a longer time than Vietnam.

Millennials was chosen for this product tour as the customer target. It is a good option because the group have many characters being fit to the food tourism and food trails, as well as their trends. The food trends are the most crucial of the theoretical framework because the observation criteria were built based on the definition and characters of those trends. I have chosen four trends: sustainability, locality and authenticity, storytelling, and micro holidays, from my point of view, these are the good choices to build the products. However, authenticity element is really tough to gauge without consuming served food and experiencing the process of activities at those spots. Although the author used to experience some of those food and activities, but it is not sufficient to visit those places and experience them with the role of tourist. For sustainable element, it is difficult to measure how good the local suppliers comply the guidance of sustainable development requirement from the authority.

Data collection part was also a really time-consuming one. It was difficult in the beginning to find the connection between definitions and themes of food trends and criteria for observing step. However, I spent more time to understand deeper what food trends can support to orient the process of choosing the spots.

I created this food tour within about two and a half of month. This was really the intensive time to me to make such a product-based thesis. It could have been better about the theoretical framework which I could found more materials as well as spend more time on reading. For example, the information from source of books in the stream.

During the online observation, the author found out that this food tour product in the Southwest could be the tour of 3 days and 2 nights totally devoted to food and food related activities. The product could be new to customers when they will be launched. The practice from other countries could be the expectation of the commissioning party to run this tour. In addition, the food tour map of Hai Phong City was launched in May 2022 has received a lot of positive signs on social media, thus this could be also a new experience for customers from domestic site.

7.2 Suggestion for next studies

This tour was built by using qualitative approach with non - participating observation because the author has been in Finland, and it was tough to experience spots in person. The tour could have been built better by themed interview with the participants as expert in the food tour such as: experience tour guides, local suppliers who offer food and activities to tourists.

There were some sources of updated book about food tours and food cultures in Asia and in some particular countries. Those are the very good academic book that the author did not have enough of time and budget to access those materials. This can help next research build the theoretical part more updated and practical scientific background which support to build the criteria for observation or make the themed question for interview technique.

A similar type of this thesis requires researchers experience on the site to get more feeling and thoughts of a visitor that can help to build a product. In addition, Southwest area is the big region, therefore with some criteria about the location and time, the tour partly reflects some spots that are typical and close to Sai Gon geographically. The tour can be departed from other places to explore more local spots of other part of the region.

7.3 The author's learning process

Firstly, this is the first time the author has made a thesis in another language than the mother language. Thus, it helps the author improve and cultivate to improve English skill, especially in writing.

I used to make the first thesis before, and it was also a product-based thesis, but I used the quantitative method and collected data from both online materials and survey by questionnaire. For this time, I made the qualitative method and non – participant observation technique. Therefore, I have been adding one more way of doing academic work to my knowledge.

The thesis was made in the intensive time, which was nearly about two and a half months, thus I have learned a lot from time management in the given time. The lessons are about how to measure the work and allocate time on those work, how to balance other work and the main task within this time. For my case, I have been having a part-time job, and also family's activities, so it was challenging but for the next time, this experience will help me arrange those things better.

During the beginning of this thesis, I was presenting and discussing this food tourism trend and also suggested the demand of this tour for commissioning party to get the agreement from them. For this point, although the commissioner has accepted this outcome, however, I think I could have

done better in the pitching part if I had sharpened that skill. This is a crucial skill that can help myself in my career if I have a chance to convince others with a new thing.

And I also would like to thank you the thesis supervisor for helping me in critical thinking. It was tough to me in connection the definitions and creating criteria for observing process. Certainly, her advice to build the theoretical framework stronger was useful and make the observing step more smoothly.

To this point, I have learned a lot of knowledge about food and food related activities in Mekong Delta area, and it is the background for me to make further studies in other parts of the region in the future. Finally, I am glad to do and complete this work with the increase and improvement of my skills and knowledge.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. The brochure of the tour



**MY THO - VINH LONG
CAN THO - SA DEC
3 DAYS 2 NIGHTS**

**MEKONG
DELTA FOOD
TOUR**

**ENJOY DINNER ON
THE YACHT**

**IMMERSE YOURSELF IN
THE FOOD ADVENTURE**

**BOOK YOUR
ADVENTURE
NOW**

Call : +84-904 934 943
Email: hello@ugotravel.vn

Figure 5. Page 1 of the tour brochure (The used photos in the brochure are copyright-free from pexels.com and pixabay.com)

EXPLORE SPECIALITIES AND GASTRONOMY OF SOUTHWEST PEOPLE



Food tour trend has been around the world

Come to Mekong Delta river to explore food and food culture, then enjoy it as a local to understand much more than traditional tours

LET THE ADVENTURES BEGIN

Beo cakes Hang Bong Market

Tasting Beo cakes beside the traditional market and the My Tho well-known noodles

Ben Tre Coconut Rice

Enjoying Ben Tre special coconut rice on the floating restaurant, then visiting the craft workshop of producing coconut candies

Hunting fish and grilling

Immersing yourself in the activity of catching fish in the pond, after that grilling them, finally enjoying in the ambiance of fruit gardens

Shopping on the Cai Rang floating market

Selecting raw materials by your own hands from the boats full of fruits and vegetables on the floating market

Cooking with locals

Acting as a local from the cooking time with local at the local house with those ingredients selected from the floating market

Can Tho night market

Once again, immersing yourself in food world at Can Tho night market with a lot of local snacks and dishes

Sweet flavors in Sa Dec food court village

Lovely cakes with sweet flavours will make you remember of the tour

Figure 6. Page 2 of the tour brochure (The used photos in the brochure are copyright-free from pexels.com and pixa-bay.com)