

## **Developing Culinary Tourism in Rural Belize**

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Due to the rapid growing rate of Belize's tourism industry, there is need for research to be able to carry out a proper development process. The present tourism experience offered by Belize is not inclusive of the rural areas in comparison to the rest of the country. Therefore, this research looks at the possibility of developing culinary tourism in rural Belize. The people living in rural Belize have a rich and unique culture filled lifestyle that can be explored further. The research focuses on the social and economic benefits of culinary tourism as well as the advantages and disadvantages of having culinary tourism in the rural Belize. **Keywords:** *Belize, Rural, Tourism, Culinary Development*

### **Introduction**

Culinary tourism is becoming one of the main reasons for travel. Culinary tourism is any experience in which a person appreciates and consumes food and drink that reflects the local cuisine, heritage, or culture of a place. Though there has been little research into food tourism, the rise and growth of culinary tourism offers many opportunities for hospitality and tourism organizations (Hunter, 2006). The rise and growth of culinary tourism is taking place globally. The demand for local cuisine is certainly becoming more popular in many destinations around the world. Recent research has shown that food and cuisine play an increasingly important role in the differentiation and promotion of specific tourist destinations (Horng & Tsai, 2010). Considering Belize's location, the country's various ethnic groups are influenced by Latin American and Caribbean traits. International tourists traveling to Belize may be able to see some of the different traits among these groups through their local culinary experience. People visiting Belize are exposed to a wide range of cultures and nationalities and there is heightened awareness and differentiation around culinary traditions (Spang, 2013).

The term Gastronationalism may help us better understand the reasons why culinary tourism may help in the differentiation and promotion of specific tourist destinations in Belize. Gastronationalism, in particular, signals the use of food production, distribution, and consumption to demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment as well as the use of nationalist sentiments to produce and market food. The importance of gastronationalism through culinary tourism in Belize would help both tourist and locals of Belize. The locals will show their national attachment in their food and their food ways. The tourist will benefit from this by learning how to differentiate among the ethnic groups found in Belize. The culture that makes up the country of Belize is diverse and rich, thanks to the country's unique mix of ethnic variations (Immigration- Belize, n.d.). Despite the richness in diversity in the country there is a high poverty rate, especially in rural areas of Belize.

According to a National Poverty Assessment in 2002, more than a third of the

population was living in poverty, and the proportion of poor households was almost twice as high in rural areas as in urban areas (IFAD, 2002). The lifestyle of the locals in rural Belize is highly influenced by their surroundings. Many locals in this area engage in agriculture for income. The National Poverty Assessment also shows that more than half of the country's poor people are subsistence farmers (IFAD 2002). However, this tropical agriculture in rural Belize may be beneficial to the people of these areas if a connection is made with rural tourism. Rural Tourism is any form of tourism that showcases, the rural life art, culture and heritage at rural locations. In both developed and developing countries, tourism is frequently supposed to be a viable means of raising the economic activity of regions (Humaira 2010). Pairing the ethnic diversity and the agriculture in the rural areas, there is potential for tourists to explore authentic local cuisine through culinary tourism in rural Belize.

Boyne, Williams, and Hall (2002) found that tourists spend almost 40% of their budget on food when traveling. Therefore, using culinary tourism as a product of the rural tourism in rural Belize may generate revenue for its locals. Expectations of rural tourism are inclusive of but not limited to: benefiting local community economically and socially, enabling interaction between locals and tourists, and enriching tourism experience in the country. Culinary tourism in rural Belize may also offer a sense of ethnic pride to the residents of these areas and they will be able to express this through gastronomy. Food offers links between social actors and their cultural pasts, shared bonds of familiar or religious identity, and narratives of organizational identity (DeSoucey 2010). Through food, people in rural Belize may be able to share their identity with tourists offering them a more unique tourism experience, which in return may generate revenue in their community.

### **Research Objectives**

The main objectives of this study are to:

1. Discuss Belizean tourism and some aspects where there is potential for development in Belizean tourism.
2. Explore the term of Gastro-nationalism and how cultural pride is reflected in rural Belizean cuisine.
3. Provide knowledge that may be useful for the development of culinary tourism products in rural Belize

### **Significance of the Study**

This research is necessary to create awareness on how to generate opportunities for locals in the different rural areas of Belize. Looking at factors such as agriculture and family recipes may provide us with knowledge of rural Belize's locals past, present and future. Thoroughly examining the authentic cuisine of the locals will help us better understand their ethnic origin and impact on the country's diversity. Most importantly, this research may provide knowledge that can be applied to design and market culinary tourism products for these areas, in an ethical manner. Expectedly, opportunities that may originate from Belizean rural culinary tourism products would be community survival, cultural pride and unity, welfare for locals, and employment opportunities.

## Methodology

To carry out the research of culinary tourism in rural Belize extensive literature on culinary tourism and rural tourism was reviewed. Personal interviews with Belizean locals were also conducted. Research was focused on finding the challenges of developing culinary products in rural areas, the socio-cultural benefits of culinary tourism and economic benefits of culinary tourism.

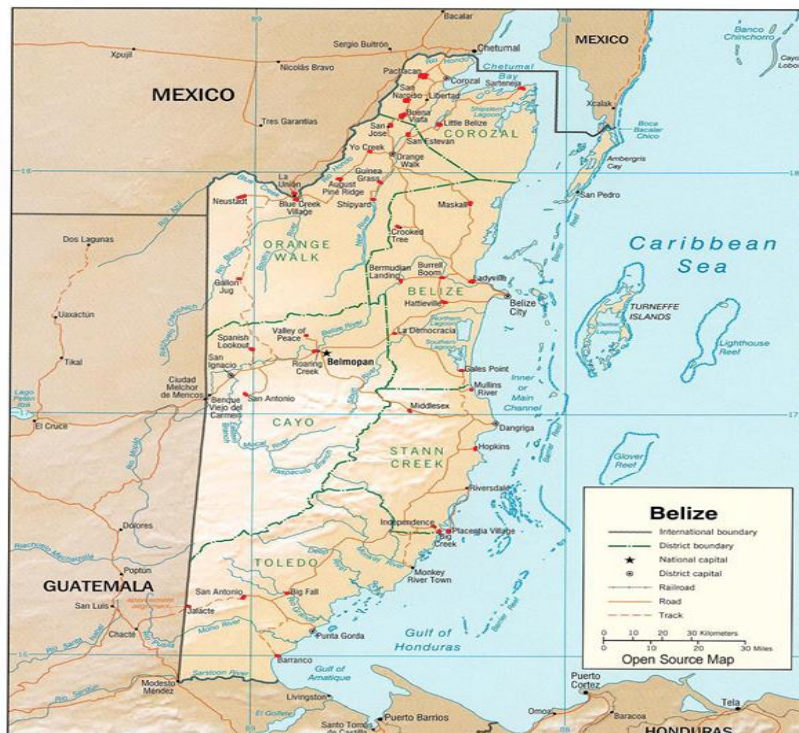
### *Research instruments:*

The use of books, articles and journals along with Internet sources were the main literature sources looked at for this study. A questionnaire was designed to carry out personal interview with locals in Belize.

### *Study Area:*

This study focuses on the Central American country of Belize. Areas of Belize looked at in the study are particularly the rural areas of Belize. The red dots on the map found in Figure 1 show the rural areas throughout Belize.

**Figure 1 - Map of Belize**



Source: [www.guidetobelize.info](http://www.guidetobelize.info), 2015

## Research Experiences - Limitations

The research discusses Belizean cuisine as food and drink that is a result of harmonized lifestyle shared by the different ethnic groups living in the country. There was limited data on each Belizean ethnic group's food. Substantial data on the role of agriculture in different ethnic group's food ways was unattainable. Limited data on statistics for culinary tourism in Belize was a disadvantage during this research. The research showed that terms and definitions with regards to culinary tourism could vary depending on the objective of the researcher.

## Literature Review

(a) *Background on the tourism activities Belize has to offer*

**Table 1- Tourist Activities in Belize**

Activity	Location
Archaeology	Country wide
Birding	Country wide
Canoeing	Cayo District
Caving	Orange Walk District & Cayo District
Fishing	Country wide except for reserved areas
Hiking	Country wide
Horse-Back Riding	Orange Walk District & Cayo District
Kayaking	Country wide (Coastal and Inland)
Sailing	Off the Coast (Islands)
Snorkeling	Belize Barrier Reef
Scuba- Diving	Belize Barrier Reef

Table 1 shows eleven most popular tourism activities that take place in Belize. According to Beltraide (2015), tourism is one of the biggest growing industries in Belize. The results for Belize's tourism-driven economy, according to Gutenberg (2015), have been significant, with the nation welcoming almost one million tourists in a calendar year for the first time in its history in 2012. The statistics show that the Belize is becoming a very popular tourist destination in the world. The country hosts six districts: Corozal, Orange Walk, Belize, Cayo, Stann Creek, and Toledo. There are popular tourist destinations in every district in Belize. Each destination introduces you to a different side of Belize, whether it is the people, the unique landscape or the habitat. (Belize adventure, n.d)

The most popular of all destinations in Belize are the cayes and Mayan ruins. Ambergris caye is Belize's largest island and the most popular destination in Belize(Belize adventure n.d). There is a combination of eco-tourism and cultural tourism in the Cayo District, which is home of the most popular mayan sites in the country. *Cayo District's* most important industry is *ecotourism* (Belizex 2015). Belize has much more to offer than just outdoor adventure filled activities. Belizean food is tasty and succulent (Belize adventure n.d). There is a market for culinary tourism in Belize but it is not one of the most popular activities as yet.

*(b) Statistics on the culinary tourism industry*

**Table 2- Annual Caribbean Festivals in Canada**

<b>Festival</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Month</b>	<b>Culinary Activities</b>
Caribana	Toronto, Ontario	July	“Chutney in de park” Picnic
Caribbean Days Fest	North Vancouver, BC	July	Island & International Food Fair
Maple Ridge Caribbean Fest	Maple Ridge, BC	August	Food vendors, offering authentic Caribbean foods (eg.) Jerk Chicken and Curried Goat
Taste of the Caribbean	Old-Montreal, Quebec	June	Cooking demonstration by celebrity chefs  All day sampling from food vendors

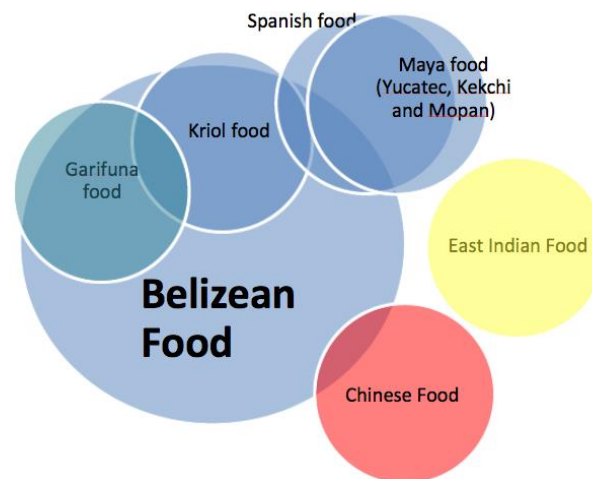
Caribbean residents of Canada display their culinary pride during festivals hosted every year. Table 2 shows the different Canadian locations, the dates and culinary activities one can engage in during Caribbean Festivals in Canada. Here we can see that despite being away from home, the Caribbean hosts take pride in sharing the culinary traits of their culture. Unfortunately, Belize does not have a festival in Canada and is not part of the Caribbean festivals that currently take place. Perhaps, in the same way Belizeans living abroad can host festivals to display their culture, including culinary traits. It may be beneficial for Belizeans to do this as well. People attending these festivals can become familiar with Caribbean culture, specifically local cuisine, and can look for that when traveling to a Caribbean country.

Though there has been little research into food tourism, the rise and growth of culinary tourism offer many opportunities for hospitality and tourism organizations (Hunter, 2006). If more research is done with regards to culinary tourism and the tourism industry there is more opportunity for success in this area of tourism. The 2004 Restaurant and Foodservice Market Research Handbook reported that travelers generated over 50% of total restaurant revenue (Graziani, 2003). Tourists are willing to spend on local food because it is part of the experiencing a destination. Recent studies show that many visitors' travel decisions are influenced by dining opportunities that connect experiences with places visited (UVM 2012). Culinary tourism in a rural setting holds promise as one potential rural economic engine (Murray & Haraldsdottir, 2004). There are many favorable traits in a rural setting for great culinary experiences because of the agricultural aspect of a rural lifestyle. The rapid availability of fresh produce would be one of the most sophisticated traits when considering culinary tourism in a rural setting.

(c) *Gastronationalism in Belize*

Describing Belize, Milligan (2010) said that Belize's geographic locale makes it a rich melting pot of ethnicities, life styles and an interesting blending of culture. Indeed the country's population is a melting pot; therefore there is the tendency that ethnic groups may want to differentiate themselves from one another. Belizean cuisine reflects the country's multiethnic population and rich history (Belize travel blog 2014). With there being a multiethnic population, there is always a debate over where a dish or recipe originated from and what ethnic group brought it to the table. In Belize competing models of nationalism inform the way individuals express identity (Spang 2013). The manner in which food is prepared also says a lot about a Belizean ethnic group, and there is an ongoing debates over which ethnic group prepares it the best. People create and employ food categories to claim cultural and national legitimacy in competitive environments and to strategically occupy individual, cultural, national and international identities (Spang, 2013). The cluster below in Figure 3 shows the result of a study carried out by Lyra Spang in Placencia, Belize. A set of cards was made that covered a range of foods one can find in Belize. The cards depicted the food on one side and had the name of the food on the other side. The 42 participants, all Belizeans, had to sort out the cards in whatever ethnic group made sense to them. Secondly the participants had to place the food card in categories that determined how Belizean they thought the food was. The categories were "most", "least", or "in between" (Spang 2013).

**Figure 3- Spang (2014) Belizean Food Cluster**

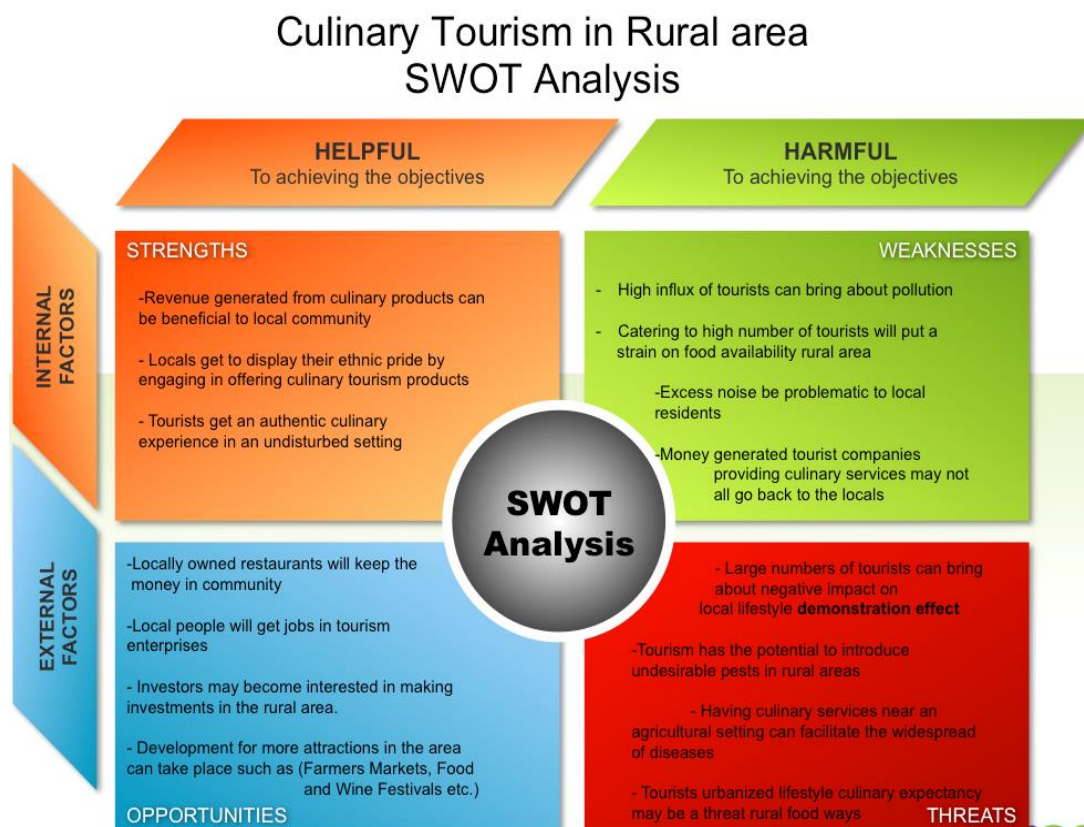


Evidently this cluster showed that the participants proved the term of Gastronationalism in Belize to be true. Participants viewed Garifuna and Kriol food to be the most Belizean, and thirdly the Mayan and Spanish food to be slightly Belizean. The Chinese and East Indian food were not considered to be part of the Belizean food. This cluster is very significant when understanding how important the role of food is when claiming national identity in Belize.

(d) *SWOT analysis of developing culinary products in rural areas*

When developing specific products such as culinary products in a rural area, there are challenges that may arise. People seeking to develop culinary products in rural areas need to expect and plan for these challenges. The SWOT analysis below in Figure 4 gives an overview of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that may arise when producing culinary tourism in rural areas. The information gathered to create the SWOT analysis is a combination of the hkhk-nature guide (2011) rural tourism advantages and disadvantages and Hall's (2010) work on advantages and disadvantages of developing cuisine, food and tourism relationships.

**Figure 4- Culinary tourism in rural area- SWOT analysis**



*Source: Hall 2010 & Hkhk 2011*

(e) *Socio- cultural benefits of culinary tourism*

There are several socio-cultural benefits that culinary tourism may bring along. Boniface (2003) puts together five dimensions that summarize the motives for culinary tourism, particularly food tourism. These dimensions are (i) anxiety- wanting to celebrate through food and drink on a holiday and to escape through traditional and non-routine foods with nostalgia; (ii) the need to show distinction, affluence and individualism; (iii) curiosity and wish for knowledge and discovery- to display education and superiority to others; (iv) a need to feel grounded amid globalization- to visit one's roots and countryside and to see how



food is derived; (v) a requirement for sensory and tactile pleasure for experience.

These five reasons for culinary tourism fall under the category of socio-cultural benefits because tourists get to engage in these culinary activities so as to satisfy these dimensions. Gastronomic and culinary tourism can be described as tourism where an opportunity for memorable food and drink experiences contributes significantly to travel motivation and behavior (Wolf, 2006). The desire to travel to a new destination and engage in learning the ways of a new culture is a socio-culture benefit for the tourist engaging in this activity. Richards (1996) claimed that cultural tourism might include experiencing the cultural attractions as well as sampling the local food.

With relation to DeSoucey's term of Gastronationalism, (Spang, 2013) argues that Belize's diverse population attempts to understand and express itself on a cultural, national and international level while dealing with the effects of a growing tourism industry and major demographic changes resulting from mass emigration and immigration. At each of these levels food is part of the processes of identity construction, differentiation and expression. Here we can see the significance of how food can play an important role in Belize's socio-cultural idea of nationalism. Situations like these, whereby a country's society utilizes food as a way to express nationality and culture proves the significance and benefits of culinary tourism to its socio-culture. Long (2004) emphasized that savoring the food of others is the way which one can really experience and accept different culture without reluctance. The importance of the connection between food and tourism cannot be overlooked.

#### *(f) Economic benefits of culinary tourism*

In 2012 the UNWTO claimed that culinary tourism is one of the fastest growing segments of a booming international tourism market that generates more income than any other global industry. As a daily necessity and means through which to explore other cultures, food has taken an increasingly important place in that market (Spang, 2013) Research has shown that along with the growing demand for culinary tourism comes high revenue for the tourism industry. More importantly, food has been recognized as an effective promotional and positioning tool of a destination (Hjalager & Richards, 2002). According to the UNWTO, gastronomic tourism is an emerging phenomenon that is being developed as a new tourism product due, among others, to the fact that according to the specialized literature over a third of tourist spending is devoted to food. The economic potential for culinary tourism in rural Belize can be seen already in the Crooked Tree Village. In Figure 1 we can see Crooked Tree Village located in between the Orange Walk and Belize District. The Village hosts an annual event called the Crooked Tree Cashew Festival. The Crooked Tree Cashew Festival is an annual event highlighting the many products and by-products of the Cashew Tree (Arana, 2015).

Among these by-products from the Cashew fruit, one can find Cashew wine. According to Arana, (2015) villagers, in recent years, have begun supplying cashew wine to a local distillery and it is has become the most profitable barrel of wine. Belize's Travelers liquors (2015), describes cashew wine to be a sweet, tasteful wine made from the rarely seen cashew fruit. In agreement to this, alcohol specialist Irwin (2014) says that cashew wine is sweet wine that is retailed at around \$6 U.S. / \$12 Belize dollars. Crooked Tree has always been cashew country but only in recent years has cashew come to be seen as a sustainable, income generating crop (Arana, 2015). Cashew wine has successful become a



culinary product in the Belizean market. Due to the success of Cashew wine, it is evident that it would be economically beneficial to explore the other culinary products that may be found in rural areas of Belize and market them through culinary tourism.

## **Discussion**

Belize has been an independent developing country since its independence in 1981. The importance for development of rural tourism is highly significant, considering that most of the countries population lives in the rural areas. Belize remains one of the least urbanized countries amongst Latin American and Caribbean countries, this trend is likely to continue (Halcrow/ NAT 2010). With the poverty assessment emphasizing on the point that Belize may remain as one of the least urbanized countries, this signifies that more interest should be given to developing the rural areas. Considering the significant amount of authentic culture found in these rural areas of Belize, rural tourism development would be a very efficient approach to improve the welfare of the people in these communities.

Culinary tourism would be one of the best approaches for rural tourism development in Belize. In the SWOT Analysis in Figure 4, we can see that there are both internal and external factors that may arise from culinary tourism that may be helpful and harmful in a rural area. The strengths of having culinary tourism in a rural area would be the revenue generated for locals in the area, the ethnic pride displayed through food preparation and authentic culinary experience for tourist in an undisturbed setting. When looking for authentic Belizean food, the tourist will ask for Rice and Beans first because it's Belize's most popular dish and if you want to offer them another authentic Belizean dish you have to explain to them what it is (Walt Gonguez, personal communication, January 16 2015).

The opportunities would be that local owned restaurants will keep money in the community, local people would get jobs in tourism food enterprises and development of more attractions in the area would take place. There is potential for tourists to visit rural areas, we just got to find a way to get the tourist here by building the proper facilities and organizing activities that may attract them to come here (Walt Gonguez, personal communication, January 16 2015). This research shows the lack of activities for tourists to engage in in Rural Belize. Weaknesses of having culinary tourism in rural areas may be the high influx of tourists can bring about many forms of pollution, catering to high number of tourists may put a strain on food availability of rural area and money generated may not all go back to the locals of the area. Some health threats that may arise due to having culinary tourism in a rural setting are that having culinary services near an agricultural setting can facilitate the widespread of diseases and tourism has the potential to introduce undesirable pests in rural areas.

Other tourism threats to rural areas are culturally inclined. Tourists may have a negative impact on the local lifestyle such as the demonstration effect and the culinary expectancy may be a threat to authentic rural food ways. The locals no longer want to eat local food; they want different food that they have tried elsewhere, that's why our menu only has one local food item on it (Travellers restaurant, personal communication, January 20 2015). As the owner of the Travellers restaurant shared in her interview during this research, locals of the Blue Creek Mennonite community no longer prefer their own food when dining at her restaurant, they want food that is Americanized such as chicken fingers and French fries accompanied by soda. Food served to tourists from all over the world coming to Belize

is a mixture of American food, Italian, Belizean and mostly anything that the tourist would ask for (Walt Gonguez, personal communication, January 16 2015). There is evidence in the research that despite not having developed culinary tourism services in Belize as yet, the locals are already adopting a preference for foreign food. The SWOT analysis definitely gives us a clear understanding of the pros and cons of culinary tourism in a rural setting. This SWOT analysis with regards to culinary tourism in rural Belize is supported by the personal interviews carried out in Belize.

### **Conclusion**

The research touched many areas that suggest that culinary tourism in rural Belize would be advantageous for the development of these areas. The cultural advantages of culinary tourism in rural Belize will give rise to a new perspective of culture in Belize. Locals may experience a sense of pride in who they are and what they come from. This research highlighted the cultural benefits that culinary tourism may have on locals. The economic advantages are the core objective of any tourism development. This research also explains how the Belizean rural economy may benefit from culinary tourism services. Both of these types of advantages are a driving force for development of a better Belizean society and economy. With substantial research and the right plan, culinary tourism products can be added to the list of tourism activities that may impact rural tourism development in Belize.

### **Direction for Research**

Considering the literature that suggests that Belize will remain as a country that is dominated there is need for better development in these areas. Research is lacking in the importance of how each ethnic group in Belize contributes to the advertised homogenous culture the country has to offer. There is a lot of work to do with regards to exploring the ethnic groups found in Belize, where they came from and how these ethnicities are merging together. The benefits and disadvantages of the mix of these ethnicities can also be explored further. There is more room for research about the rural areas of Belize and how tourism can be promoted in these areas. The development of these areas are significant to maintaining local culture, therefore research with objective on determining and maintaining local culture in these would be highly beneficial. A lot of work in relation to culture and heritage throughout Belize needs to be done to have a better understanding on how to carry out ethical development in the country.

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