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Let Them Eat Chaya: Cultural Revitalization through Culinary Offerings in Belize

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Abstract: The Belizean culinary landscape has experienced a dramatic shift in recent years, with an abundance of “fresh” and “local” dishes (i.e., salads) appearing on restaurant menus. While many tourists appreciate the option of ordering salad, there is a truly local green that might be equally or better suited to the tourist market given what we know about tourists’ interests in both authenticity and healthful eating. This paper explores both host and guest attitudes towards chaya, a leafy green that is high in protein and may have anti-diabetic properties. We argue that tourists enjoy eating chaya but restaurateurs are not taking advantage of its potential as a sustainable, low-cost dish that could also help preserve traditional foodways. Though restaurateurs are apt to cite supply chain issues as one of the reasons they are reluctant to make chaya a menu mainstay, we also believe that when a food occupies an ambiguous place in the local foodscape—as chaya does—local hosts may be unable to leverage it to its full potential.

Keywords: culinary tourism; heritage crops; authenticity; ethno-medicine; food



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1. Introduction

On any given day in San Ignacio, Belize, you can find groups of tourists gathered at one of the newer bistros downtown, where they serve large entrée salads made from locally grown, organic greens. Local Belizeans will be there too, as the owner has worked hard to establish his business as one that serves all people, though the relatively high prices mean that for many Belizeans, it is a special treat. Fifteen years ago, the idea of being able to order a salad with organic spring greens in a San Ignacio restaurant would have been laughable. There was not much of a “culinary scene” to speak of back then. However, things are changing.

We have been conducting research on tourism, cultural heritage, and sustainability in Belize for approximately five years, but we have both been visiting the country annually for much longer. Our long-term relationships with local farmers, restaurateurs, and resort owners have led us to focus on local foodways. Lauren’s scholarly interests in the practices surrounding farming emerged in part from her own desire to eat something other than rice and beans while in Belize, but also from the overwhelmingly positive reactions our students have to eating local food when they accompany us on study abroad trips. Cameron’s interest in the medicinal properties of chaya grew out of his personal obsession with eating it.

Chaya is a leafy green that, according to local, Belizean lore, has anti-diabetic properties and other health benefits [1,2]. It grows easily, without the need for irrigation or tending, making it very sustainable. It is found throughout Mexico and Central America and can be grown in other tropical locations as well. Certain strains of raw chaya can sting the hands during harvesting, although some individuals report that they are immune to this or have built up a tolerance, and its sap is a natural insecticide that requires it to be cooked before eating in order to remove trace elements of cyanide. Chaya contains a small amount of naturally occurring cyanogenic glycoside, a toxin found in various plants (e.g.,

cherries, almonds, apricots, lima beans, and apples). Thus, *chaya* must be boiled or heat-dried in order to bring the level of toxin within the range for human consumption [3]. We can neither verify nor contradict our interlocutors' reports that some people have built up a tolerance to this skin irritation, we merely present it as part of the ethnographic record. There are also some varieties of *chaya* that do not sting.

When cooked, this sturdy green leaf has a chewy texture and a taste reminiscent of collard greens, functioning in recipes such as sautéed spinach. We know that white tourists from the Global North oftentimes bring a "racial frame" with them to their destinations through which they, consciously or not, interpret interactions with local hosts [4]. As the majority of tourists we have encountered in Belize hail from the United States, it would not be surprising for them to make a connection between *chaya*—a somewhat bitter, boiled green—and the African Diaspora, since African American cuisine retains influences from West Africa, both in terms of what is cooked (e.g., leafy greens) and how it is prepared [5]. However, nothing in our research suggests that tourists are associating *chaya* with Afro-Belizean (i.e., Creoles or Garifuna) cuisine. *Chaya* grows wild throughout the nation, and many of our Belizean friends have vivid memories of eating it as kids or having it prepared for a family member as a medicinal treatment. Many still consume it on a regular basis. Yet, it is rarely presented to tourists as an iconic Belizean food, as one might expect given its 'super food' status and its place in cultural memory.

What tourists typically encounter as authentically Belizean cuisine is rice and beans with stewed chicken, topped with, of course, a hot "peppa sauce" made from habanero peppers. Whereas Everett [6] cautions against assuming that home cooking and restaurant meals are one and the same, rice and beans is a dish regularly consumed in both contexts. It is typically the first meal we seek out when we arrive in the country. However, eventually, after being offered rice and beans at every turn in Belize, tourists want something else to eat. According to Ian, a Maya chef at a luxury resort in the Cayo District, they want "gringo food." And what is gringo food? "Anything fried," he says, "or salad!" Some days they serve so many salads that the kitchen runs out of salad bowls.

However, *chaya* is not a substitute for salad. Salad leaves are typically served raw; *chaya* must be sautéed or blended to neutralize the cyanide in its leaves. When both salad and *chaya* are categorized as 'healthy foods,' they may be in competition with one another, at least at the level of the consumer's subconscious. In actual practice, other factors come into play such as whether a person wants the crispness of raw leaves or the softer and chewier texture of sautéed greens. Yet, we find it useful to compare tourists' accounts of these dishes because they offer insight into how these two food products circulate within the symbolic economy of Belize's tourist industry. Sometimes, tourists do want the ontological comfort of eating something familiar such as a salad, but they are also open to trying new things such as *chaya*. With that in mind, as well as *chaya*'s 'super food' nutritional status (Table 1) and its strong cultural associations, we have been curious as to why *chaya* is not a more explicit part of what is presented to tourists as distinctly Belizean cuisine.

Although consumed by a wide swath of society, *chaya* occupies an ambiguous place in the local foodscape because it is at least somewhat ethnically marked by its mild association with indigeneity and, though it can be cultivated intentionally, it is also a wild food. Wildness in the Belizean context sometimes carries negative connotations of poverty and backwardness [7,8]. Whereas rice and beans with stew chicken fit squarely with the image of Belizeanness promoted to tourists, *chaya* is something of a misfit because it is associated more with indigenous groups than the Kriol people and it is a fresh vegetable but not crisp and cold like a locally sourced salad. Using *chaya* in Belize as a case study, we argue that when a food occupies an ambiguous place in the local foodscape, farmers and hospitality workers may be missing an opportunity to leverage culinary tourism for the preservation of heritage crops and traditional foodways.

2. Materials and Methods

We wondered if Ian's observations about salads were just applicable to the resort where he works or indicative of a larger trend. Were tourists really as invested in eating salad, something they could easily eat at home, as Ian seemed to think and why might that be? We looked to TripAdvisor.com as an indicator of tourists' preferences. While we certainly saw many people ordering salads while we were at restaurants and heard from friends in the Belizean service industry that these were very popular menu items, we wanted to be able to analyze tourist discourse about salads. Additionally, we wanted to do this without interrupting people who were in the middle of their meals (out of respect for both tourists and restaurateurs). Knowing that many restaurants in San Ignacio encourage guests to post reviews on TripAdvisor, we felt confident that we would find an abundance of text to analyze on this website. However, we recognize that the representation of certain restaurants in our sample may be skewed by proprietors of those businesses asking patrons to post reviews and restaurants whose owners are savvy about the importance of social media may be overrepresented in our analysis.

The rapid exchange of user-generated content online has created an electronic word-of-mouth system by which tourists can significantly influence the businesses created to serve them [9]. Tourists know this and so do local businesses. Netnography is being increasingly used by scholars in hospitality management and related fields, and while virtual ethnography is becoming recognized as a valid, stand-alone technique within anthropology [10], we utilized it as a complement to other methods. Because social media sites such as TripAdvisor are anonymous, we avoided common pitfalls of survey research such as social desirability bias. Tourists appeared to be writing honest reviews, sometimes brutally so, such as one individual who said "[t]he 'salad' that came with the meal was shredded cabbage that tasted like it had been tossed with toilet bowl cleaner." (Note: this is not a reference to *chaya*, but instead to a cabbage side dish.) Anonymity can embolden social media users to post things they would not likely say in person, which is a double-edged sword for researchers. Fortunately, several studies have found TripAdvisor to be a trustworthy source of data [9].

The use of anonymous digital comments does come with certain limitations. TripAdvisor allows members to build a profile that is displayed in association with their review (e.g., name, gender, hometown, and a photo which provides at least a clue as to their ethnic background). However, this information is not required, so many profiles are incomplete, and it is possible that even those appearing complete may or may not truly reflect the identity of the individual writing the reviews. Given that other scholars have found a relatively close match between individuals' real-life and virtual personas, especially if there is a chance that a real-life contact might access one's virtual profile [11], we were not terribly concerned about people using 'fake' profiles on TripAdvisor.

A more serious limitation is that we cannot draw any definitive conclusions about how demographic factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, and age affect tourists' perceptions of Belizean cuisine. Furthermore, we are operating under the assumption that most review-writers are tourists, but our sample may include local Belizeans, North American immigrants living in Belize, and/or Belizeans who now live abroad and were returning as tourists. Based on our long-term research in Belize, however, we feel confident in describing the majority of tourists who visit San Ignacio as white, North Americans with interests in nature, adventure, and cultural (mainly archaeological) tourism. Their age range is vast, and they may or may not be traveling on a budget.

To be eligible for inclusion in our sample of salad reviews, a restaurant had to be located in San Ignacio or the immediately surrounding areas (e.g., the nearby Maya village of Succotz). All of the restaurants we examined would be reachable by taxi in 20 min or less provided one started at a central location in town and did not face any extraneous circumstances (e.g., flooded roadways). We excluded restaurants that only served pastries or dessert, since it would be unlikely to find a salad here, and also excluded any restaurant with fewer than 50 reviews. We ultimately included 18 restaurants in our sample. Though

this yielded a potential sample of more than 900 reviews, we only analyzed the 209 that mentioned salad. At most of these restaurants, salads were mentioned very infrequently but there were three restaurants that had a disproportionately high number of reviews mentioning salad, including the bistro run by Pepem Nah. Not coincidentally, two of those restaurants have their own farm, which provides them access to locally grown, organic produce.

By and large, whenever a salad was mentioned, it was praised. There were a handful of negative reviews of meals including salads, but those tended to be about unappealing dressings or overall blandness, which says more about the preparation of the dish than the salad greens themselves. It was far more common for diners to excessively praise the salad if for nothing else than just existing on the menu, a welcome respite from starchy dishes such as rice and beans that tourists in Belize eat daily. It is also possible that they are responding to the omnivore's dilemma by seeking the ontological comfort of a familiar dish for at least one of their meals while abroad [12]. The word "fresh" appeared in more than 50 of these reviews along with words such as "organic" and "local," "beautiful" and even "*chic*".

Eating raw vegetables while abroad may be considered risky by some [13], but it is not the same kind of risk-taking as eating bugs or other 'exotic' foods deemed daring. In this context, ordering raw vegetables might be taken as an indication that the customer believes the restaurant to be of high quality. Cohen and Avieli [14] argue that "tourists' apprehensions regarding the safety of local food at the destination constitute a significant impediment to novel culinary experiences." Again, this often revolves around the raw/cooked binary [15], Israeli tourists visiting Asia, for example, have been documented avoiding eating salads for fear that the vegetables might have been washed in contaminated water [14]; indeed, avoiding raw vegetables and fruits without peels is a commonly dispensed piece of advice for tourists visiting the tropics. We simply do not know how many people avoided eating salads in Belizean restaurants for fear of contamination, a limitation of the 'netnography' approach [16], but those who ate them did not appear to express any fears about safety.

Many tourists appreciate a fresh, organic salad, that much seems clear. American consumers have come to expect that the greens served in entree salads will be organic, thanks to an association established by Alice Waters in her Berkeley, California restaurant in the 1980s [17]. However, it is also worth noting that restaurants were not criticized if they failed to have salad on the menu. Ontological comfort and 'freshness' are not the only things tourists seek. Therefore, we wanted to explore how tourists feel about eating *chaya*. Again, we recognize that these are two very different dishes—one served raw, the other cooked; one crisp, the other chewy—but we were curious about the degree to which tourists were seeking out other vegetables and how they were being discussed. To address this question, we returned to TripAdvisor as a source of textual data. We used similar parameters to establish a sample for addressing this question as we did with regard to salad but removed the stipulation that a restaurant must have more than 50 reviews. This allowed us to look at some of the smaller guest houses where we thought tourists might have a better chance of encountering home cooking, where we believed *chaya* would be more common. Incidentally, the bulk of the reviews we analyzed were *not* from these smaller businesses but from the most popular restaurants in town. Applying these selection criteria yielded a sample of nine restaurants. We then searched for reviews for mentions of *chaya*, which yielded a sample of 108 reviews. Given that salad (especially an entrée salad) is a relative newcomer to the Belizean culinary scene in comparison to *chaya*, which most of our local interlocutors grew up eating, the fact that our sample for tourist reviews of *chaya* is approximately half the size of our sample for reviews of salad is telling in and of itself.

Knowing that tourists often forget the exact name of the dish they ordered, we expanded our search to include a variety of words/phrases we anticipated them using in lieu of “chaya.” We searched for local spinach, Mexican spinach, and Maya spinach. All of these terms have been used by restaurant servers or bartenders in our presence to describe chaya to foreign tourists. (This is not to be confused with Malabar spinach, which is sometimes eaten at home by local Belizeans. We have not encountered this on any menu in Belize to date.) We only included in our sample those additional reviews that clearly referred to chaya. For example, we included one that mentioned “a special appetizer made from something like spinach,” but excluded a review that mentioned “rice and a spinach yam side.” In the case of the former, we were confident they were referring to an appetizer that many other reviewers described as having chaya in it. In the latter case, we know the owner of the resort mentioned in the review is a big believer in utilizing local crops, but we did not have enough information to know if this reviewer really ate spinach or misrecognized chaya. Our final sample included 113 reviews, which referenced nine different restaurants. (Technically, a case could be made that we only had eight restaurants in the sample because one of the places labeled as a bed and breakfast type accommodation may actually have been serving overnight guests in an actual restaurant that was already named in the sample. However, we feel confident that our analysis would not be changed if we were to count this as eight rather than nine restaurants, so we have deferred to the categories used in our TripAdvisor dataset.) An overwhelming number of these reviews (66) came from a popular bistro that is known for its breakfast menu, whose late Lebanese-Belizean owner was an enthusiastic promoter of chaya. Thirty-three of the reviews came from a second restaurant that serves a popular appetizer containing chaya. The bistro is popular with both locals and foreigners, particularly backpackers, archaeologists, and others who seek out local hotspots. The second restaurant also serves a mix of locals and foreigners, but more of the latter.

In order to understand the role of chaya in the local foodscape in Belize, we also conducted participant observation at farms, restaurants, and the weekly market in San Ignacio. We have led 12 study abroad trips to Belize and each group toured at least two different farms (e.g., the organic farm at Pepem Nah, another resort growing its own coffee, a family-run organic farm specializing in cacao, a family-operated orange grove, a large-scale banana plantation). In each instance, we have been able to witness common questions asked by foreign visitors about sustainability, irrigation, intercropping, pest prevention, crop insurance, etc., as well as farmers’ reactions to these questions. Part of Lauren’s participant observation also included two weeks working on the organic farm at Pepem Nah, where daily activities included planting crops, maintaining plant beds, harvesting produce, foraging for wild seasonings, and preparing the greenhouses for new crops. She also volunteered briefly with a local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) group, which is primarily operated by North American immigrants living in the Cayo District.

We also conducted formal and informal interviews with farmers, restauranteurs, and CSA volunteers. These interviews tended to be wide ranging and emergent. A student research assistant conducted several interviews with restauranteurs on her own, following a more rigid interview schedule and asking questions about the individual’s experiences with chaya. Interviewees were purposively selected because of their experience working in the hospitality industry and/or their strong opinions about chaya. Pseudonyms are used for all people and places other than actual geographic locations (e.g., San Ignacio) and their role within the local tourist economy is provided as they are introduced below.

3. Background

Although Western societies tend to prioritize the visual, eating is a form of consumption that allows the tourist to incorporate the locale into his or her body. It is a deeper form of engagement than mere sightseeing [18]. Culinary tourism is focused on the preparation and consumption of “locally produced foodstuffs prepared in both traditional and new ways, which connects dining opportunities to local culture and thereby renders the fulfillment of a biological imperative as a culturally enriching experience” [6]. Using food to mark the distinctiveness of a location is a technique that has been used since the nineteenth century [19], but tourists differ in terms of whether they want their meals to provide a thrilling encounter with Otherness or the ontological security that comes with familiar fare [12]. In tourism research, the adventurous traveler who tries all things local is often juxtaposed with the stereotypical ‘bad tourist’ who is uncomfortable with new experiences and demands the comforts of home [20]. In the Belizean context, Spang [21] has fittingly labeled these individuals “the pickies,” tourists who are hard to please in nearly every way. Being picky about what one eats is in many ways another sign of relative affluence; the destitute do not have the luxury of being so choosy [6]. Of course, the reality of how foreign visitors engage with local foodscapes is more complex.

There is biological justification for humans’ love/hate relationship with unfamiliar foods. Fischler [22] uses the phrase “omnivore’s paradox” to sum up the challenge omnivores face in (a) needing to eat a variety of food sources in order to meet basic nutritional needs, and (b) needing to be wary of new foods in case they should be poisonous. Polan [23] calls this the “omnivore’s dilemma.” In theory, tourists travel because they want new experiences and “experimenting with local cuisine is part of the exotic experience they seek” [24]. Yet, most tourists vacillate between experimentation and retreat into familiarity [25]. Experiencing something new and different may be part of the appeal of travel, but too much novelty can be overwhelming, leading them to seek security in more familiar foods [26]. Feeling adventurous, one might order eggs scrambled with chaya. Or, if one is feeling less bold, a crisp salad made from locally sourced lettuce might be comforting in its familiarity, with just the right amount of ‘exoticness’ [25].

For a culinary tourist, eating is a peak experience. For a hiker or birdwatcher, food may merely be a means to sustain the body for further engagement with their choice activity. Yet, even for those individuals who highly prize authenticity in their peak dining experiences, what dishes tourists consider to be authentic expressions of locality may not at all resemble what local people actually eat [6,27]. As mentioned above, the typical ‘tourist meal’ in Belize consists of rice and beans and stewed chicken, often served with a fried plantain and a side of coleslaw or potato salad. Additionally, while this is commonly eaten in Belizean homes around the country, particularly for a Sunday meal, to reduce Belize’s vast culinary diversity to this single meal obscures a great deal of local history and contributes to a hegemonic nationalism that undercuts the nation’s unique multiculturalism [21]. It also becomes a bit redundant and many tourists want variety or something ‘fresh,’ which could mean a lot of different things but in our experience often refers to fruits and vegetables.

It is hard for local farmers to keep pace with the demand for local, organic salad greens in part because delicate lettuce varieties are challenging to grow in Belize’s tropical climate [28]. Having another option for tourists might make this burden more manageable. It would also be a way to leverage tourism for the benefit of traditional ethnoecology [29], ensuring that expanded production of non-native crops does not supplant indigenous foodstuffs. Furthermore, the nutritional profile of chaya would seem to appeal to tourists’ class-based moral drive to seek out ‘super foods.’ Yet, chaya remains at best a novelty item rather than a menu mainstay at local restaurants, even those catering to tourists.

Servers have the opportunity to ‘sell’ local culinary heritage when they interact with guests. What constitutes local heritage, however, is complicated by the surprising ethnic diversity of such a small country. A hummus platter served in Belize might not seem particularly ‘local’ until one understands the important role the Lebanese have played in Belize’s history first as middlemen in the *chicle* industry and later as merchants. Likewise,

Chinese food has become localized thanks to numerous Chinese families in the community. Stew chicken with rice and beans and a side of potato salad—arguably the quintessential Belizean dish—is Kriol, but the predominant ethnicity in the Cayo District is Mestizo [30]. The pressure to assimilate has led to many people distancing themselves from their Maya heritage, though this trend may be reversing as cultural tourism and local heritage revitalization efforts revalorize this identity [31]. Thus, linguistically, ‘Maya’ remains a marked category, which has implications for how *chaya*—often referred to as Maya spinach—fits into the local foodscape.

Zara is a server who has worked at the luxury eco-resort Pepem Nah for more than 12 years. Staying at Pepem Nah, just outside the town of San Ignacio, can cost upwards of 500 USD per night. Sustainability is a priority, but guests still expect a high level of service and luxurious accommodations. For some, this is the trip of their lifetimes—an unusual splurge—but for others, vacations in this price range are not out of the ordinary. Zara says that guests at Pepem Nah are often hesitant to try local foods, but once guests get the courage to try these dishes, they tend to like the Belizean fare. *Chaya* is a case in point. When guests ask for recommendations, she is quick to suggest that they try a stir fry dish made with organic vegetables grown on the property. On Sundays, she recommends Belizean stew chicken. In the morning, however, she recommends that they try their “Mexican breakfast,” which consists of scrambled eggs, corn tortillas, queso blanco, and sautéed *chaya*. The guests have typically never heard of *chaya* before, so Zara describes it as “Maya spinach” or “Mexican spinach,” using both terms interchangeably. She enjoys telling guests about its health benefits. She tells them that the “Maya spinach is really good because . . . it is very rich in iron, so they like that too.” Here, it is worth noting the conflation of the terms Maya(n) and Mexican. In San Ignacio, the Maya people are predominantly Yucatec, having come from Mexico during the Caste Wars. However, this conflation with regard to how *chaya* is described also occurs in other parts of the country where Kekchi and Mopan Maya groups predominate, suggesting a more generalized link between *chaya* and indigeneity or Otherness. (Interestingly, Choco, Blanco, and Thiagarajan [32] documented the use of *chaya* among Yucatec Maya in the northern part of Belize, but not among the Kekchi Maya groups they surveyed in southern Belize.) Corn-based dishes—like the corn tortillas in Pepem Nah’s Mexican breakfast—have a similarly ambiguous place in the local foodscape, being associated with the Maya or with the Spanish (which is how Spanish-speaking migrants from surrounding countries are identified). Tourists like *chaya*, Zara says, “especially people that are vegetarian,” but this does not necessarily alter their food-ordering behavior in a significant manner.

Tourists’ dining habits remain tied to their socio-economic class positions regardless of the variety of foods with which they are presented while on vacation [6]. They do not leave behind the moral imperatives that shape their consumption habits when they leave home. Those things that are both influenced by and in turn signal their social/class positions back home also inform the ways in which they engage with and evaluate local culinary offerings [6]. Most of the tourists staying at Pepem Nah are middle- and upper-class, well-educated, white North Americans. Not coincidentally, affluent, well-educated whites is the demographic to whom culinary tourism is generally geared *and* the same demographic that typically advocates for local, sustainable, organic foods [19,33]. Furthermore, what Everett [6] describes as “middle-to-upper-class mainstream Western cuisine” has incorporated and been shaped by elements of the counterculture’s health-food movement. It makes sense, then, that tourists might opt for a salad comprised of locally sourced produce. It satisfies their class-based sensibilities to eat something healthy, organic, and locally produced. However, then again, so might *chaya*.

4. Results: What Tourists Think of Chaya

With regard to the TripAdvisor data, in just under one-quarter of the sample, the reviewer neutrally reported chaya as a component in one or more dishes they ordered at a particular restaurant. These reviews were neither positive nor negative, just informational. In 83 of the reviews, however, which is approximately 75%, chaya was commented upon favorably. Chaya was called “yummy,” “delicious,” “heaven,” and readers were warned not to miss it. In fact, there were only three reviews that even came close to being classified as ‘negative.’ One person’s omelet had “a bit too much chaya for [his] liking.” Another described his entire breakfast—which included chaya in scrambled eggs—as mediocre. Additionally, a third reviewer who happened to eat chaya as part of his or her dinner wound up with gastrointestinal issues that night, but what role the chaya dish played in that is unclear.

The overwhelmingly positive reaction to chaya on TripAdvisor seems to suggest that chaya is widely enjoyed by foreign guests—or at the very least, it is not disliked. Nor is it feared or significantly Otherized by being labeled as ‘yucky’ [16,34]. However, is it a signifier of authenticity, and does “authenticity”—whatever that means—even matter to these tourists? We do not intend to be flippant; rather, we are referring to authenticity as a troubled concept in both popular and academic discourse. For some, authenticity means adherence to timeless traditions, others take a constructivist approach and recognize that living, changing traditions may be as authentic or more so than artificially preserved practices. Now that tourists can easily post about their experiences via social media, they help construct a notion of what is authentic in particular places, thus influencing the perceptions of the tourists who come after them [35].

To find out whether or not authenticity is a relevant construct to the tourists writing TripAdvisor reviews about San Ignacio, we went back to the TripAdvisor website to conduct a refined search. Limiting ourselves to just the nine restaurants in our sample that are known to serve chaya, we found the words “authentic” and “authenticity” mentioned 124 times and the word “traditional” appeared 94 times. Typically, this was with regard to the specific dishes being served, though it is possible that tourists are also evaluating the overall ‘authenticity’ of a restaurant based on food and other cues [35]. This reaffirmed our belief that tourists are indeed interested in authenticity when they travel to San Ignacio, a conclusion that aligns well with the majority of the anthropological literature on tourism [36]. Yet, looking at the reviews that mention chaya, there were only seven that we coded as demonstrating a concern with ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ local food (and two of these are ambiguous because they mention Belizean food, but do not explicitly call it real or authentic). The word traditional only appears twice, but never in reference to chaya. In one instance, a reviewer was describing the ubiquitous rice and beans as a traditional Belizean dish and in the other, a reviewer was describing the menu at a popular bistro as mostly traditional American breakfast fare (e.g., pancakes, bacon and eggs), with the exception of the chaya dishes. In other words, by excluding chaya from what is considered traditional American fare, chaya was implicitly linked with traditional Belizean cuisine. The underwhelming link between chaya and authentic/traditional Belizean cuisine in the minds of tourists made us question whether or not chaya really was a traditional component of the local diet and, if so, why tourists did not seem to be making that connection.

Without being told that chaya is traditional or authentic, tourists focus on its status as a health food. Of the 113 reviews in our TripAdvisor sample, nearly one-quarter (26) describe chaya for their readers in terms of a more familiar vegetable. In all but one of these, spinach is specifically mentioned as a point of comparison. Often chaya is described as spinach like, similar to spinach, or “their version of spinach.” Sometimes, the comparison is subtler. For example, one reviewer who ate breakfast at the popular bistro wrote that chaya “is a green leaf when cooked is more nutritious than spinach.” Even without calling it spinach like, this reviewer uses spinach as a reference point to help the reader understand what chaya is.

5. Results: What Local Belizeans Think about Chaya

Based on our interviews and participant observation, local residents are certainly familiar with chaya and consider it an extraordinarily healthy food. Because our research focuses on tourism, our key consultants are primarily employed in the hospitality industry. Thus, our sample may be skewed in favor of people who are particularly knowledgeable about local and traditional foods. Nonetheless, we found their recollections about chaya to be useful in terms of better understanding how local people conceptualize chaya and what role it has played in local cuisine and their comments are representative of conversations we have had with many Belizeans all over the country. Whenever we talk to people about chaya, formally or informally, we hear stories of family members who used chaya for its medicinal properties, sometimes being encouraged to do so by medical doctors.

Gabriel is a local restaurateur who told us that “a lot of people grew chaya in their backyards. It grows pretty easily, and everyone knows the nutritional value.” Locals have their own way of describing chaya’s health benefits, which may have more to do with its role in traditional culture than the biomedical markers of interest to Western scientists [37]. However, chaya has been proven to contain a high amount of key nutrients such as protein, fiber, calcium and vitamin C. Thus, it is more nutritious than spinach, the plant to which it is so often compared [3,38]. Gabriel explained “[chaya] is good to keep your blood level at a healthy . . . place on the chart.” He also points out that it is “very rich in vitamins.” Lorenzo, a server at a different restaurant told us that his mother recommended eating chaya to combat bruising, for which she would make a topical salve from chaya and milk. Lorenzo also said it is good for your metabolism, digestion, and the circulatory system. Zara stressed its iron content. Mary, whose family owns the breakfast bistro, said that it is good to eat during pregnancy. She ate chaya instead of taking prenatal vitamins.

Ophelia comes from one of the wealthier families in town. She clearly remembers her dad being diagnosed with high blood pressure in his early 40s. He had to change his diet to manage his condition, and that included incorporating chaya into nearly every recipe her mom made. Within four years, she says, her dad’s blood pressure was back to a normal level and he was off medications. Most of the specific dishes Ophelia remembers her mom adding chaya to were already part of the local foodscape—like garnaches, similar to Mexican tostadas—but her mom also made quiche and added chaya to it. Furthermore, Ophelia recalls that because the town was predominately Catholic when she grew up, everyone would eat bollito de chaya on Good Friday, a day that Catholics are not supposed to eat meat.

6. Not on the Menu

Given the importance of chaya in these local restaurateurs’ diets and their understanding of it as a superfood, it was surprising to us that it is not featured on more menus. Gabriel worries about the supply chain. He does not want to put something on the menu if he is not going to be able to serve it consistently. This is a real issue because his restaurant has become the go-to lunch spot for busloads of cruise ship tourists that are on day-trips to the nearby ruins and for other large groups. He says they might serve it in bollos (similar to but softer than a tamale) for a student group “if (they are) interested in eating real indigenous type food,” but he does not make these a recurrent feature of the menu.

Ophelia had similar concerns. They offer a green juice at the bar, but guests must request it because it is not listed on their menu. Interestingly, the hotel does grow some of their own chaya, but they use that to feed the numerous iguanas living on site. Even Mary, whose family restaurant is known for its specialized chaya breakfast dishes, worries about the supply chain. They have partnered with a farmer in a nearby Maya village who delivers approximately 20 lbs. per week to their restaurant. They have worked with him for eight years and are fortunate to get year-round deliveries from him. If he is late with a delivery, she jokes that he had better not be selling to Pepem Nah. They also harvest some chaya from a bush that grows outside the restaurant.

We are sympathetic to the need restaurateurs have to making sure ingredients can be reliably sourced, but we were surprised that Gabriel, Ophelia, and Mary would all express concerns about chaya shortages. In addition to the man who supplies Mary's restaurant, we know another Maya farmer just outside the town who grows chaya and believes passionately in agricultural self-sufficiency as a matter of national security. We interviewed a North American immigrant with several acres of land upon which she is growing hundreds of chaya plants and she dreams of being able to dry and sell it commercially. Then, there is Ace, a tour guide in his 30s who has also been an assistant on several international, archaeological research projects. He has more plants than he can handle, but despite his extensive plantings, he does not sell chaya commercially because he does not have buyers. Periodically, his friends will come and fill bags full of chaya leaves, which they steam and freeze for later use. Additionally, when the local CSA could not source any fresh lettuce for their predominately North American immigrant subscribers, they were able to quickly and easily find more than enough chaya to replace it. Furthermore, chaya grows so easily that you almost have to work harder to get rid of it than to just let it grow. So, it seems that there is supply available, and it also seems that there is, or could be, significant demand for recipes featuring chaya. Yet, it remains a menu novelty rather than a mainstay.

Although Gabriel, Ophelia, and Mary are all extremely well connected within San Ignacio and belong to families that have been in the community for generations, it is possible that they are unaware of some of the potential suppliers of chaya that we happen to know. It may also be worth considering that many people do not like to handle chaya because it can irritate the skin. On the day that the CSA had to substitute chaya for lettuce, Lauren was the only one willing to handle the chaya and even wearing gloves, she walked away with red welts covering her hands and forearms. Perhaps this is one of the unspoken factors that contributes to their concerns about supply. After all, both Gabriel and Mary told us that it is not as common for people to grow chaya in town as it once was. As the town has grown, people have less yard space, Mary told us, but also surmised people might not want their kids playing near it and getting hurt.

It is perfectly reasonable for these individuals to be worried about the supply chain, but production could always be expanded and there are ways to avoid being stung. Besides, the supply chain for organic lettuce is also somewhat strained and deliveries cannot always be counted on, yet more and more restaurants appear to be offering entrée salads. Perhaps there might be other reasons that chaya has not become an icon of Belizean identity displayed to tourists with the same frequency as rice and beans and stew chicken.

Wilk [8,39] has discussed the long-term damage done to the local foodscape by colonialism and the fetishization of imported food. George Price, the first prime minister of Belize, faced an uphill battle in encouraging people to embrace their local, traditional foods. Bush meat and wild foodstuffs were fine to eat when visiting family out in the villages or perhaps even on holidays when traditional foods assume a special status [40], but certain foods were not seen as fitting for cosmopolitan and upwardly mobile Belizeans. We do not think it is coincidental that several interviewees claimed that knowledge of how to prepare chaya is disappearing among younger Belizeans. If this loss is something that the older generations lament, which seems to be the case when we talk to people such as Gabriel, it might be worth considering that tourist interest in local traditions can be the impetus to preserve or even revitalize dormant cultural practices [41].

7. A Missed Opportunity?

When tourists recognize that they are eating chaya, they tend to like it. When our local friends talk about chaya, they reflect on its traditional use value as food and medicine. So, why do not more of the TripAdvisor reviews discuss chaya as an authentic local food tradition, something they seem to care greatly about in their discussions of other foods? This may be an instance where the lack of data is, in and of itself, data. There is nothing in the texts we gathered that helps to explain why chaya is not considered traditional. This is a question that might be well suited to pile sorting, triad testing, or cultural consensus modeling in order to better understand the cognitive models tourists possess with regard to traditional foods [21]. At present, however, we can only hypothesize that tourists do not recognize chaya as part of the traditional foodscape because they are never told that it is. Rice and beans and stewed chicken have become iconic exemplars of traditional Belizean cuisine, sometimes at the expense of other foods that are just as traditional but fall outside of the streamlined narrative presented to tourists unaware of the sophisticated culinary code switching in which Belizeans regularly engage [21].

Our research shows that tourists want both the comfort of home and a taste of the local, but in different contexts. Chaya may actually be the ideal dish to serve tourists that are in the middle ground between wanting food to serve as a “peak experience,” a highlight of their vacation, and those who want food to provide a respite from the onslaught of difference encountered during the tourist experience. Based on our analyses of these reviews, tourists are becoming aware of chaya’s immense health benefits as they dine in popular restaurants but are not associating it with traditional or authentic foodways, all of which suggests untapped opportunities for local restaurants and farmers [42], particularly those who grow chaya but have no market for it.

The conversations we have had with Belizean interlocutors about chaya are strikingly similar. It does not matter if the individual came from a wealthy, urban background, such as Ophelia, or a poorer, rural one, such as Ace. It does not matter if an individual’s ancestry is Maya, Mestizo, or Lebanese. Thus, chaya is not racialized in the same way that collard greens tend to be in the southern U.S. The only demographic factor that came up in interviews about who eats chaya was age, with several people saying that younger Belizeans are forgetting how to prepare it. Therefore, we conclude that chaya is a well-known plant, is popularly believed to be good for one’s health, and was commonly eaten within the last generation. Many still consume it. Yet, chaya is not actively being promoted to tourists as a quintessentially local and/or traditional food on par with other iconic Belizean dishes.

Culinary tourists take pleasure in consuming the Other via their cuisine, whether to become more cosmopolitan themselves or out of a sincere desire to learn about and honor another culture; however, the seemingly simple, universal human act of eating may also obscure the social and political inequalities that are involved in feeding tourists [7,43]. Popular wisdom tells us ‘you are what you eat,’ a point echoed by Fishler [22] when he writes that “any given human individual is constructed, biologically, psychologically and socially by the foods he/she chooses to incorporate.” It is not uncommon for the stigma attached to an ethnic group to be transferred to their cuisine. Foods associated with marginalized ethnic groups are often treated as suspect and may become the subject of urban legends and other forms of misinformation [44]. In the case of Bolivians, llama meat is associated with indigenous peasants and therefore shunned by most middle-class Bolivians in La Paz [24]. Yet, quinoa, which is also associated with indigenous peasants, has made it onto middle- and upper-class Bolivian plates. What makes the difference? Quinoa has become a trendy food in North America and Europe, where its health benefits are touted. Foreign valorization of a formerly disparaged food elevates it in the eyes of local, upwardly mobile consumers as well. Anthropologist Clare Sammells spoke with several consultants in Bolivia who joked that “if foreigners could be convinced to eat llama meat, the Bolivian upper class would follow in kind” [24].

Sammells [27] actually has documented the growing number of touristic restaurants in La Paz that serve llama meat as a signature national dish. Do tourists want llama meat served just the way it might be in a traditional peasant home? Probably not. Rather, the foods developed for touristic consumption represent an astute understanding on the part of local chefs regarding what tourists think they want (i.e., authenticity) and what they are actually willing to eat. Sammells [27] uses the term “haute traditional” for cuisines that bridge the divide between traditional dishes made with locally sourced ingredients in local domestic contexts and foods served in prestigious and/or public settings to more elite, cosmopolitan diners. When the haute traditional whets the cosmopolitan’s appetite for a particular food, even if humble in origin, status adheres to that food and makes it more palatable, literally and metaphorically, to the upwardly mobile classes in its place of origin.

None of our local contacts have said anything particularly negative about *chaya* in our presence; rather, it is almost absent from the conversation unless we bring it up or happen to be talking to someone who is particularly passionate about it. Of course, once we show an interest in *chaya*, we have had people talk to us for an hour or more without pause. As foreigners, it would be inappropriate for us to push a particular agenda with regard to growing or serving *chaya*, but based on how global consumers have responded to other ethnically-marked super foods such as quinoa, we believe something similar could happen with *chaya* in Belize. Otherness is a valuable economic resource that can be marketed to tourists [16]. Considering that food-related expenditures constitute approximately one-third of what tourists spend [45], it is essential that locals understand how tourists make decisions about what to eat. We believe that tourists’ interests in eating ‘authentic’ and ‘traditional’ dishes presents an opportunity for the resignification of *chaya*. Promoting *chaya* as a culturally significant heritage crop with a role in traditional cuisine and ethnomedicine might make *chaya* more appealing to those health-conscious diners that are also interested in traditional, ‘authentic,’ and local food traditions. Stressing the role of *chaya* in traditional local foodways could transform an average meal into a peak experience for culinary and cultural tourists alike; its compatibility with the local climate also makes it a sustainable means of feeding the large numbers of tourists who visit Belize each year.

8. Conclusions

Culinary tourism is an area of projected growth [18]. Eating local foods allows tourists to complement their cultural experiences with gastronomic knowledge of place (*ibid.*). However, based on textual analysis of reviews on TripAdvisor, we have concluded that tourists want an alternative to the starchy staples that get coded as typical or authentic Belizean fare. From the way tourists discuss salads on TripAdvisor, and the incredible demand there seems to be for them, we have inferred that tourists want a healthy, fresh, locally grown alternative to the common fare of rice and beans. This is predictable given that most tourists are middle and upper class, a demographic that has been conditioned to attach moral virtue to healthful eating [6].

The discourse surrounding *chaya* further supports our belief that tourists appreciate healthy food. Many tourists are willing to try *chaya* not, as a reading of the anthropological literature on tourism would suggest, for its associations with traditional or authentic foodways, but for its nutritional value. Yet, understanding tourists’ desires for authenticity, we suspect that they would eat even more *chaya* if it were also promoted as a traditional food, which we know it to be.

One of the long-standing assumptions in the anthropology of tourism is that guests bring certain pre-established frames with them and view their experiences at the destination through that lens [36,46]; however, one of the things that makes our findings novel—at least when compared to studies such as Everett’s study [6] of class-based dining habits—is the openness tourists in Belize seem to have towards the local narratives about *chaya*. Our unique approach of pairing a content analysis of TripAdvisor data with locally conducted participant observation and interviews allows us to confirm the almost verbatim translation

of local discourse about chaya into the virtual environment. This may be a reassuring observation to local hosts whose face-to-face engagements with tourists has been disrupted by COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdowns throughout much of 2020 and 2021.

Our research suggests that chaya occupies an ambiguous place in the local foodscape. Given its nutritional status, the ease with which it is grown, and locals' familiarity and positive associations with it, we are surprised that chaya does not feature more prominently in local restaurant menus. Our consultants cited concerns about the supply chain as a reason that they, personally, do not put it on their menus more often. We believe its ambiguous positioning in the local foodscape is also to blame. Should more local restaurateurs become convinced that chaya is deserving of a place at the (fine dining) table, foreign valorization of it might be instrumental in preserving this part of local culinary and ethnomedicinal heritage.

Table 1. Nutritional value of Chaya versus spinach based on selected components (adapted from [38]).

Component	Chaya	Spinach
protein %	5.7	3.2
fat %	0.4	0.3
crude fiber %	1.9	0.9
total carbohydrate %	4.2	3.8
calcium (mg/100 g)	199.4	101.3
phosphorus (mg/100 g)	39.0	30.0
potassium (mg/100 g)	217.2	146.5
iron (mg/100 g)	11.4	5.7
vitamin C (mg/100 g)	164.7	48.1
average nutritive value	14.94	6.38

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