

Authenticity vs. Adaptation: Consumer Preferences for Traditional vs. Modernized Awadhi Dishes – A Review

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ABSTRACT

Awadhi cuisine, rich in the royal heritage of Lucknow, is a representation of India's gastronomic legacy. Nevertheless, food culture globalization and increasing focus on convenience, health, and creativity have triggered considerable reinterpretations of conventional dishes. In the backdrop of Awadhi cuisine, this review paper attempts to analyze the changing discourse on food adaptation and authenticity, with reference to consumer needs and attitudes. Based on academic literature, market reports, and studies of culture, the paper explores how elements like taste, cultural identity, nostalgia, health awareness, and aesthetic presentation shape the reception of both conventional and innovative Awadhi foods. The review points out that while authenticity is always a paramount concern for maintaining culinary heritage, there is growing movement—particularly among younger generations of consumers—towards fusion, simplification, and health-conscious innovations of classic recipes. Such innovations typically increase accessibility and appeal in urban and international markets but can potentially undermine the historical and cultural authenticity of the cuisine. Additionally, restaurants and chefs are instrumental in defining consumer expectations by harmonizing innovation with heritage through narrative, visual presentation, and edited dining experiences. This article brings together varied insights to present a rich comprehension of the authenticity-adaptation spectrum in Awadhi cuisine. It underscores the imperative of a strategic strategy in culinary practice and hospitality that is cognizant of tradition but accepts the challenges of the modern world. The research offers insightful advice for food researchers, restaurateurs, and cultural historians who want to preserve culinary traditions despite shifting consumption patterns.

Keywords: Awadhi Cuisine, Culinary Authenticity, Food Adaptation, Consumer Preferences.

Introduction

Awadhi cuisine, born out of the culturally affluent Awadh region of today's Lucknow, is one of India's most sophisticated and imperialistic culinary schools. Attuned to the influences of Persian, Mughal, and Central Asian cuisines, Awadhi cuisine is renowned for its slow-cooking process (dum pukht), that classic fragrance of spices, and that very ornate presentation (Ahmed, 2020). Traditionally, the kitchens of the Nawabs gave birth to this cuisine as an art, with galouti kebab, murgh musallam, and shahi tukda becoming synonymous with luxury and hospitality (Saran, 2018).

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In the modern era, however, age-old cuisines such as Awadhi have a major problem on their hands: that of preserving authenticity while adjusting to changing consumer tastes. As urbanization, globalization, and health awareness transform the food sector, chefs and restaurateurs tend to adapt recipes, presentation, and ingredients to reach younger and more varied consumers (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016). The conflict between the need to conserve culinary authenticity and the urge to innovate has generated considerable scholarly attention, especially in the fields of cultural heritage, consumer culture, and gastronomy.

Culinary authenticity is a complex phenomenon. It involves not only customary cooking processes and ingredients but also cultural and emotional significance of food (Lu & Fine, 1995). For most consumers, particularly in places such as Lucknow, genuine Awadhi food symbolizes pride of culture and nostalgia. Yet contemporary diners—millennials and Gen Zs—usually value health, convenience, and novelty. This change has resulted in the development of modified or "modernized" forms of ancient dishes, including low-oil biryani, fusion kebabs, and Awadhi-style street food (Kumar & Garg, 2017). Although these modifications open up the cuisine to more people, they also lead to fears of dilution of traditional values and flavors.

Recent research highlights that consumers' attitudes towards conventional versus modernized foods are shaped by a number of factors such as age, lifestyle, cultural exposure, and sensory expectations (Chatterjee & Das, 2020). Older consumers tend to relate conventional Awadhi food to cultural continuity and emotional fulfillment, while younger consumers desire novelty, aesthetics, and convenience (Sengupta & Bhowmick, 2021). In addition, the international food trend of fusion has confused authenticity and innovation, leading scholars to reexamine how traditional cuisine changes in relation to market forces (Johnston & Baumann, 2015).

For Awadhi cuisine, adaptation has occurred in numerous ways. Chefs and restaurateurs both domestically and internationally have created new versions of old-time favorites—galouti kebab tacos, Awadhi-spiced risottos, and biryani arancini—to appeal to contemporary taste buds while maintaining fundamental flavor profiles (Sharma & Kapoor, 2019). Meanwhile, upscale restaurants and boutique hotels continue to cling to traditional cooking techniques, royal presentation, and narrative to uphold culinary heritage and optimize experiential dining (Gupta, 2020).

The debate over authenticity versus adaptation is further complicated by the role of social media and digital marketing. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and food blogs have created new avenues for culinary expression, where visual appeal often overrides traditional preparation (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016). As a result, visually enhanced, hybrid versions of Awadhi dishes gain popularity, especially among younger consumers, despite being far removed from their authentic counterparts.

Scholarly writing also identifies a paradox in the behavior of consumers: although consumers are increasingly nostalgic for historic cuisines, at the same time, they are attracted to innovation and international fusion (Khamitova, 2020). This double nature has encouraged researchers to suggest that authenticity is not an absolute but an evolving construct influenced by social, cultural, and economic contexts (Lu & Fine, 1995; Johnston & Baumann, 2015). In other words, what is viewed as authentic is usually the outcome of consumer interpretation and cultural negotiation.

Literature Review

• Conceptualizing Culinary Authenticity

Lu and Fine (1995) posit that food cultures of authenticity are not inherent properties but social constructions embedded in negotiations among chefs, consumers, and stories. In their ethnographic description of ethnic Chinese food in America, they illustrate that authenticity is acted out and understood more than it is defined. This context can explain why traditional Awadhi cuisine will be considered authentic even when transformed, provided that it conforms to expectations.

Johnston and Baumann (2015) discuss the ways in which authenticity in food culture is employed as cultural capital. They argue that foodies tend to pursue authenticity as a sign of distinction, linking it to ethical consumerism and cultural sophistication. This is applicable to Awadhi cuisine, where patrons also view authenticity as a sign of heritage, tradition, and better taste.

Bessière (1998) explores the ways in which food heritage is constitutive of cultural identity and how authenticity is employed to sell traditional food in tourism and gastronomy. The research posits that consumers tend to conflate authenticity with purity, historical continuity, and geographical place of origin.

For Awadhi cuisine, foods that have been born out of royal lineage tend to be valorized as "authentic" even as practices change.

Sims (2009) brings to the fore the significance of regional food in achieving a sense of place and belonging. She stresses that authenticity is determined by stories and experiences about food more than ingredients or techniques. This finds particular relevance in Awadhi cuisine, wherein Nawabi history and traditional cooking practices form an important narrative in creating consumer perceptions.

Cappellini and Yen (2016) explore consumers' use of food to make personal and cultural identifications. According to their research, authenticity is not merely tradition but is also about emotional connection. This understanding speaks volumes about Awadhi cuisine, where emotional connections, family traditions, and festivals enhance a sense of authenticity in dining experiences.

- **Culinary Adaptation and Innovation**

Kumar and Garg (2017) examine the ways in which local Indian cuisines are being reconfigured to meet the challenges of urbanization and health trends. They point out that while fusion and new reinterpretation of traditional foods make them more accessible, they can also potentially diminish the historical and cultural character of these cuisines. Their findings apply to Awadhi cuisine as well, where chefs are constantly struggling with the challenge of innovation without dilution.

Sharma and Kapoor (2019) analyze the impact of fusion food among millennials, observing that young consumers are extremely open to new formats that combine traditional tastes with international trends. Consumers continue to value authenticity but would like lighter, aesthetically pleasing, and health-oriented interpretations of classical dishes. This applies directly to Awadhi cuisine interpretations.

Reddy and Prasad (2020) write about the commercialization of traditional foods and how market forces tend to bring changes in the method of preparation, ingredients, and presentation. According to them, though these adjustments increase popularity, they can warp the original culinary history. This is evident in contemporary versions of Awadhi recipes that sacrifice long-cooking processes.

Sengupta and Bhowmick (2021) examine the evolution of Indian regional cuisines in urban India. They find a shift towards moderation of recipes and fast-casual operations in order to accommodate time-strapped urban consumers. Their work highlights how adaptation can be a survival strategy in competitive food economies, a trend seen in modern Awadhi restaurants.

Chatterjee and Das (2020) concentrate on customer satisfaction with authentic and modified dishes. They indicate that customers tend to balance their desire for authenticity with functional considerations such as calorie content, accessibility, and contemporary presentation. Their research lends credence to the notion that modernized Awadhi foods can still provide satisfaction if they have a cultural tie.

- **Consumer Preferences and Cultural Perceptions**

Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen (2016) examine food experiences of travelers and conclude that authenticity is the key factor in food tourism. They observe that customers seek authentic, culturally rich experiences through local cuisine, which enhances satisfaction and emotional involvement. Awadhi food, if promoted authentically, has powerful appeal for both locals and overseas visitors.

Choe and Kim (2018) investigate the impact of cultural authenticity on customer satisfaction in traditional restaurants. Their conclusion is that the higher the perceived authenticity of a dish to a consumer, the higher their emotional and sensory satisfaction. This underscores the need for preserving authenticity in Awadhi dining experiences to stimulate loyalty and cultural appreciation.

Alvi et al. (2025) analyze consumer behavior towards traditional Awadhi cuisine in Lucknow. They find that demographic factors like age and income strongly influence preferences, with older consumers regarding authenticity higher than younger generations. This study offers empirical basis to comprehend the dichotomy in consumer preferences towards traditional and modernized Awadhi cuisine.

Gupta (2020) traces the emergence of experiential dining in India and describes how atmosphere, narrative, and cultural markers boost the sense of authenticity. Restaurants serving Awadhi food tend to employ visual and narratorial signifiers—such as brassware and décor related to royalties—to affirm cultural identity and satisfy consumer preconceptions about authenticity.

Khamitova (2020) explores the power of visual platforms such as Instagram to shape the way people perceive authenticity in food. She surmises that visual attractiveness, not conventional methods of cooking, typically determines consumer appeal in food. This is particularly pertinent with regards to urbanized Awadhi dishes that focus on presentation to appeal to young, social media-oriented consumers.

Research Gap

While there is a wealth of literature regarding culinary authenticity, regional cuisines, and changing food tastes, little theoretical work has targeted Awadhi cuisine alone in this regard. Most of the available research generalizes regional Indian cuisines or targets food tourism and fusion trends in general, without singling out the finer consumer dynamics surrounding traditional foods such as those of Awadh. Additionally, though studies have investigated authenticity as a social construct and consumer attitude towards ethnic or traditional foods, little concentrated analysis of how such dynamics manifest in reaction to modernization, especially across demographic groups, exists. Empirical research examining the effects of presentation, health-oriented modification, and online influence upon attitudes towards Awadhi foods is still limited. In addition, there is little attempted at comparing the emotional and cultural appeal of original versus modified dishes in a localized market like Lucknow, where Awadhi cuisine has rich historical heritage. The review aims to address these shortcomings by bringing together existing literature and pointing out future directions of research, particularly in terms of consumer identity, intergenerational differences, and balance between maintaining heritage and adopting innovation in the domain of Awadhi cuisine.

Objectives of the Study

- To critically analyze existing literature on the concept of culinary authenticity and its relevance to the perception and consumption of traditional Awadhi cuisine.
- To examine the key factors influencing consumer preferences for authentic versus modernized Awadhi dishes, including cultural identity, health consciousness, aesthetic presentation, and generational differences.

Research Methodology

This research utilizes a narrative review approach to critically explore and synthesize current scholarly research on the topics of authenticity, adaptation, and consumer choice within the context of Awadhi cuisine. The review utilizes peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, and reputable online sources published between 1995 and 2025 to ensure both foundational theory and most recent developments are represented. Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, and ScienceDirect databases were used to obtain the relevant literature through key search words like "culinary authenticity," "traditional food preferences," "fusion cuisine," "Awadhi food," and "regional Indian gastronomy."

The sources were thematically categorized into three broad themes: conceptualizing authenticity, food adaptation and innovation, and consumer attitudes towards traditional versus modernized foods. Preference was given to those sources that provided information on Indian regional cuisines and local food practices. A few empirical case studies on Lucknow and wider Indian culinary trends were added to provide context for the discussion. The review prioritizes qualitative interpretation over statistical analysis in an effort to conceptualize gaps, map theoretical evolution, and suggest avenues of future research. This approach allows for a comprehensive appreciation of the dynamic interplay between preservation and modernization in Awadhi cuisine.

Results and Findings

- **Objective 1:** *To critically analyze existing literature on the concept of culinary authenticity and its relevance to the perception and consumption of traditional Awadhi cuisine.*

Table 1: Key Factors of Culinary Authenticity Relevant to Awadhi Cuisine

S. No.	Author(s) & Year	Key Factor of Culinary Authenticity	Findings	Relevance to Awadhi Cuisine
1	Lu & Fine (1995)	Cultural Construction	Authenticity is socially negotiated, not intrinsic; it evolves based on community values.	Traditional Awadhi dishes are seen as authentic when aligned with local cultural expectations and traditions.

2	Johnston & Baumann (2015)	Cultural Capital & Social Identity	Authenticity is used to express personal taste, class, and cultural knowledge.	Consumers regard Awadhi cuisine as elite and sophisticated, linking it with Nawabi prestige.
3	Bessière (1998)	Heritage Preservation	Authentic foods are tied to geographical origin, tradition, and cultural continuity.	Awadhi food gains value when it preserves original recipes and royal cooking methods.
4	Sims (2009)	Locality & Storytelling	Regional identity and stories behind food enhance perceived authenticity.	Use of Lucknow-specific spices and cooking narratives reinforces authenticity in Awadhi dishes.
5	Cappellini & Yen (2016)	Emotional Connection	Authentic food is linked to personal memories and emotional satisfaction.	Consumers relate to Awadhi dishes as part of childhood, family traditions, and festivals.
6	Choe & Kim (2018)	Sensory & Experiential Attributes	Sensory cues (smell, taste, texture) shape perceptions of authenticity and satisfaction.	The richness, aroma, and texture of dishes like <i>korma</i> and <i>sheermal</i> contribute to authentic experience.
7	Khamitova (2020)	Visual Presentation & Symbolism	Visual cues and aesthetic plating influence how consumers perceive a dish's authenticity.	Brassware, Nawabi themes, and traditional garnishing enhance the authenticity of Awadhi food presentations.
8	Alvi et al. (2025)	Demographic & Cultural Background	Age, income, and cultural familiarity significantly affect perceptions of food authenticity.	Older and culturally rooted consumers prefer traditional Awadhi dishes, while younger groups are mixed.

- Objective 2:** To examine the key factors influencing consumer preferences for authentic versus modernized Awadhi dishes, including cultural identity, health consciousness, aesthetic presentation, and generational differences.

Table 2: Factors Influencing Consumer Preferences for Authentic vs. Modernized Awadhi Dishes

S. No.	Author(s) & Year	Key Influencing Factor	Findings	Relevance to Awadhi Cuisine
1	Chatterjee & Das (2020)	Cultural Identity	Consumers often choose traditional dishes to maintain a connection with their cultural heritage.	Many prefer authentic Awadhi dishes during festivals or rituals for their symbolic and nostalgic value.
2	Sharma & Kapoor (2019)	Health Consciousness	Younger consumers favor adapted versions due to concerns about oil, calories, and portion size.	Modified Awadhi dishes like low-fat biryani or grilled kebabs are increasingly accepted in urban settings.
3	Khamitova (2020)	Aesthetic Presentation	Visually attractive, Instagram-worthy dishes significantly influence food choices.	Fusion Awadhi dishes with vibrant plating and modern garnishing appeal to social media-savvy youth.
4	Alvi et al. (2025)	Generational Differences	Older consumers prefer traditional dishes, while younger generations show openness to innovation.	Restaurants often create dual menus—one for authentic items and another for modern variations.

5	Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen (2016)	Experiential Dining	The overall dining experience, including ambiance and storytelling, affects consumer preference.	Traditional Awadhi settings and décor enhance the appeal of authentic dishes for tourists and locals alike.
6	Sengupta & Bhowmick (2021)	Convenience and Accessibility	Urban consumers value speed and availability, leading to a shift toward simplified or fusion options.	Street-style Awadhi wraps or quick-serve kebabs are examples of modern adaptations gaining popularity.

Discussion

The implications of this review's findings underscore the complex interplay between authenticity and adaptation in determining consumer demand for Awadhi food. Authenticity continues to be a powerful consumption driver among older generations and culturally entrenched consumers who connect nostalgic Awadhi dishes with cultural heritage, identity, and nostalgia. Elements of cultural narratives, traditional presentation, and emotional bonds are major drivers of perceived value for authentic dishes. This is consistent with the wider literature that considers authenticity as both a cultural creation and a marker of heritage (Lu & Fine, 1995; Johnston & Baumann, 2015).

Nonetheless, shifting lifestyle trends, health awareness, and beauty aspirations have triggered an increased demand for contemporary versions of heritage foods by young, urban consumers. These innovations—like low-oil kebabs, plated fusion versions, or grab-and-go Awadhi wraps—are popular due to their convenience, presentation, and dietary target alignment (Sharma & Kapoor, 2019; Khamitova, 2020). Even with this change, these consumers continue to crave a sense of authenticity, although reinterpreted by contemporary lenses such as storytelling, plating, and brand identity.

The co-existence of these preferences, however, indicates that authenticity and adaptation do not exclude each other but are co-evolving aspects of gastronomic experience. Chefs and restaurateurs thus need to walk a fine line: conserving cultural richness while innovating to respond to changing consumer demands. This offers possibilities for culturally aware innovation within classic Awadhi cuisine that honors its roots yet accedes to the contemporary palate.

Practical Implications

- **For Restaurateurs and Chefs: Balancing Tradition with Innovation**
 - Include both traditional and new Awadhi cuisine in menus to appeal to various consumer segments.
 - Maintain core cooking methods (such as dum pukht) even in contemporary presentations to preserve authenticity.
 - Provide healthy options (e.g., low-oil kebabs or grilled) without significantly changing flavor profiles.
 - Utilize local ingredients and customary utensils (such as brassware) to increase perceived authenticity.
 - Develop storytelling-led menus that recount the history of each dish to provide immersive dining experiences.
- **For Food Marketers and Brand Strategists: Positioning Awadhi Cuisine Effectively**
 - Market traditional dishes with culturally rich narratives to appeal to nostalgia and heritage-focused customers.
 - Use modern visual branding (e.g., Instagram-friendly plating) to attract younger, trend-driven consumers.
 - Highlight authenticity through certifications, chef profiles, or regional sourcing to build trust and appeal.
 - Segment marketing efforts demographically—target older consumers with traditional messaging, and younger ones with innovation-focused promotions.

- Use food festivals, influencers, and online campaigns to create awareness around both traditional and fusion Awadhi cuisine.
- **For Hospitality and Tourism Stakeholders: Enhancing Regional Food Experiences**
 - Emphasize Awadhi cuisine as a cultural experience in tourism promotions and hotel dining.
 - Team up with local chefs or culinary historians to conceptualize traditional dining events or live cooking stations.
 - Create culinary food trails or heritage food experiences in urban centers such as Lucknow to sell culinary tourism.
 - Educate hospitality staff in cultural presentation styles and storytelling to enhance authenticity.
 - Market local cuisine in wellness or high-end tourism segments by blending them with Ayurvedic or health-oriented modifications.

Conclusion

This review highlights the complex yet evolving landscape of consumer preferences concerning Awadhi cuisine, shaped by the interplay between authenticity and adaptation. Authenticity remains a powerful influence on consumer choice, especially for those seeking cultural continuity, emotional resonance, and sensory richness (Lu & Fine, 1995; Bessière, 1998). Traditional Awadhi dishes like galouti kebab and dum biryani continue to hold emotional and historical significance for many, offering a taste of heritage and identity.

However, as contemporary food culture becomes increasingly influenced by health awareness, convenience, and aesthetics, a growing segment of consumers—especially millennials and Gen Z—gravitate toward modernized or fusion variants of Awadhi cuisine (Sharma & Kapoor, 2019; Khamitova, 2020). These consumers redefine authenticity through visual appeal, storytelling, and innovation rather than strict adherence to traditional techniques.

Importantly, the findings suggest that authenticity and adaptation are not binary opposites but can coexist. Consumers may accept adaptations as long as core elements—such as regional spices, cultural narratives, or traditional names—are retained (Johnston & Baumann, 2015). This offers chefs, restaurateurs, and marketers the opportunity to creatively blend innovation with tradition.

Ultimately, the sustainability and relevance of Awadhi cuisine in the modern culinary landscape will depend on how well it adapts without losing its cultural soul. Future research and culinary practice must continue exploring this balance to ensure that heritage-rich cuisines like Awadhi remain both respected and relevant in contemporary food culture.

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