

Exploring the genuine flavours of Tehran's cafes: a postmodern destination for tourism

Maryam Farash Khiabani

Urbanism, University of Art, Tehran, Iran

Maryamkhiabani86@gmail.com

Abstract

Globalisation and multiculturalism have significant impacts on food culture worldwide. Iran, with its diverse climate and local cuisine, has a rich variety of cooking styles. However, the situation is different in major bustling cities like Tehran; fast-food and routine restaurants that serve the same foods are primarily ordinary, and some traditional foods are also served. Meanwhile, some Western-style restaurants serve the most popular international foods. Here, some cafes play a different role as a third place.

This research aims to explore the role of Tehran's cafes in promoting and expanding Iranian local cuisine as a tourism destination. It was conducted using a qualitative approach, incorporating ethnography, and involved 22 locations with their users at the centre of Tehran city.

The research outcome reveals that in recent years, some of these cafés have profoundly impacted the introduction of local and traditional Iranian foods and beverages to tourists and new generations, while also serving as a reminder to elders. Some 'home cafés' symbolise the connection between yesterday and modern life: a postmodern destination. The main themes derived from the study portray these places as authentic, friendly, aesthetic, and creative, with a cultural vibe, highlighting the lost aspects of the city and the importance of cafés in preserving our past.

Keywords: gastronomy tourism, postmodernism, café culture, third place, conservation

1. Introduction

Food occupies a crucial position in local communities, cultural identities, and daily life. The use of regional and natural ingredients, distinct cooking styles, and even the choice of cutlery are central to this culinary tradition. However, international brands and cooking methods, particularly fast food, have become increasingly prevalent even in small towns worldwide. These modern influences, along with the global proliferation of food brands, often overshadow traditional local cuisines. In response, some communities are striving to reconnect with their culinary roots by reimagining traditional styles and creating welcoming spaces for diverse groups. These semi-public venues aim to foster connections that extend beyond routine conversations, addressing the limitations often found in fully public spaces. They also contribute to reviving the often-overlooked histories and cultures of the area, fostering a sense of belonging. As Ray Oldenburg describes, such places can evoke a sensation of being both at home and away from home, which he refers to as a "third place." Today, the necessity of these social spaces is increasingly recognised.

Even when the COVID-19 lockdowns commenced, a reporter from Boston inquired whether we believed third places would return. We responded confidently with a "Yes!" as we understood that online meetings and virtual happy hours could never substitute for in-person interactions (<https://unesco.org>). The swift rebound from COVID-19 indicates that the tourism market and industry, as well as many governments at various levels, have not yet acknowledged the importance of redirecting tourism growth (Butler, 2024). Herein, the vital role of these spaces, not merely as venues to serve specific items, but as social hubs, is evident in our currently isolated societies. Some of these spaces are not only welcoming to the locals but also cater to contemporary tourists.

This transition stems from recent changes in tourism concepts and cultural developments in our contemporary era. We are moving beyond traditional or even modern definitions of our needs, social lives, tourism, and other aspects of human experience. These encompass interdisciplinary terms that reflect current diversity and provide practical ideas for navigating daily life in this age of variety. This research aims to explore the current land-

scape of tourism and the role of one of the prominent examples of third places—cafés—in shaping gastronomy tourism in central Tehran, the capital of Iran. As the country's pioneering modern city, Tehran is witnessing new trends and diverse demands that seek to respond to its dynamic atmosphere.

1. The Era of Diversity: Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a set of conditions that currently influence all aspects of contemporary life, and whether we like it or not, it will continue to have this impact (Ward, 1997: 304). Although postmodernism emerged from various architectural movements and theorists in this field, Jean-François Lyotard is one of its most essential philosophers. He rejects the authoritarian view of history and society, which he refers to as meta-narratives (Lyotard, 1984). In his view, if we want to summarise the term postmodern as much as possible, it can be defined as a distrust of meta-narratives. For Lyotard and other intellectuals concerned with the ideal of freedom, only small narratives (*Petits récits*) and the proliferation of meanings are compelling in the postmodern era. Lyotard's postmodern mission is to oppose totalitarianism and totalising ideologies and to avoid the longing for unity (Nesbitt, 1997: 63-66).

Over the last two decades, instead of critical writers on modern urbanism directly engaging with postmodern texts, the emphasis on the effects of the modern approach to urbanism and the criticisms directed at it has led to the creation of works that explore the relationship between the city and its inhabitants, striving to create spaces that encourage greater public presence. One notable example of these works is Michael Sorkin's *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan* (2009), which, influenced by Jane Jacobs, describes the author's walks in Manhattan. He believes that modernity, influenced by science, has consistently faced ethical challenges and attributes the excessive focus on functionalism to this issue. In the writings of Jan Gehl (1987, 2010, 2013), the prevalence of car-centric spaces, resulting from modernist urban planning, is critiqued, highlighting the importance of pedestrians and urbanism that prioritises people.

One of the primary characteristics of postmodern urbanism is contextualism, which encompasses historical, physical, social, and public culture, in contrast to modern urbanism, which relies on a break from the past (Ellin, 1999: 185). Meanwhile, figures such as Jacobs, Mumford, Lynch, and others emphasised the importance of understanding the reality of the contemporary city. In contrast to the rupture of modernity, they also examined the matter of historical continuity within urban spaces. Another significant work from this period is Jonathan Raban's book, *Soft City*, published in 1974. Harvey describes this work as follows: "Soft City, written at that time, is a presumptive text that should not be interpreted as anti-modern; rather, it serves as a vital acknowledgement of the arrival of the postmodern era" (Harvey, 1990: 6). In this text, Raban provides a unique portrayal of life in his city, London. According to Harvey, *Soft City* outlines the concept of the postmodern city, and its depiction of urban life reflects the inherent and conditional aspects of becoming postmodern (Stevenson, 2014).

A part of this perspective relates to the evolving concept of the city. In the postmodern cultural context, the city, according to Castells (1989), has become a "collective organisation of consumption." Here, a duality emerges where the boundary between an alternative culture opposing the dominant culture, in its criticism of tradition or consumerism, can itself reproduce another pattern of consumption. In this pattern, even "simplicity" as a value becomes a commodity, which is often available only to a limited group. This notion recalls the saying, "I'm not rich enough to live simply," or the English proverb, "I'm not rich enough to buy cheap things," both of which emphasise the importance of quality over quantity. This perspective values and upholds high-quality, durable goods from the past. A lifestyle is celebrated and perpetuated in which "tradition" is revived through nostalgia; shops selling nostalgic items and spaces become popular, and the representation of everything is both marketable and priced. The closer the represented commodity is to its original form, while discarding the unpleasant aspects of tradition, the more it becomes accepted. Consequently, cultural items that revitalise traditions to meet current needs and lifestyles, rather than opulent spaces, are increasingly appealing due to their simplicity and are in demand among certain groups of people, primarily because of a growing awareness of climate challenges. After considering the effects of modernity and the use of machinery, along with the increase in air pollution, even some city dwellers are striving to reduce their carbon footprint by dining out less at restaurants and opting for

fast food alternatives, choosing to cycle and utilise public transport, prioritising their health, thereby transforming their everyday lifestyle. This shift also affects visits to other spaces and tourism cultures.

In terms of tourism, postmodern tourism is another term that warrants specific research (see Pecheniuk & Kiziun, 2022). Still, it can be briefly described as an open approach to different cultures, embracing pluralism, relativity, and diversity (Uriely, 1997). This approach utilises new methods to collect information about destinations and devises innovative journeys and paths rather than traditional ones. This reflects the growing tendency to seek individualised services and remain in small-scale enterprises (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000). In this context, postmodern tourism encompasses specialised experiences, the rising attraction of nostalgia and heritage tourism, the growth of nature-focused tourism, the emergence of simulated tourism environments, and a variety of tourist experiences and motivations (Uriely, 1997). Post-tourists primarily consist of middle-class individuals who view oppositional travel as a valuable cultural experience and seek to differentiate themselves from conventional, modern, and mass tourists (Dujmović & Vitasović, 2015). In this study, the emphasis is on “postmodernism” as a “condition” and its impact on tourism destinations, approaches and the “cultural turn”, as cultural scholars have mentioned (Jameson, 1998; Alexander, 1988) and not precisely on “postmodern tourism” as a specific term. One of the main changes in tourism definitions in the postmodern condition is the consideration of new categories and the importance of culture. One of them is food, cuisine, or gastronomic tourism, which is primarily characterised by its cultural aspects.

2. Gastronomy tourism

Gastronomy tourism centres on travel experiences focused on food and related activities. This form of tourism encompasses authentic, traditional, and innovative culinary experiences, including visits to local producers, attendance at food festivals, and participation in cooking courses (<https://www.unwto.org/glossary-tourism-terms>). Nowadays, tourism is facing various challenges, including climate change and environmental issues; thus, traditional concepts of tourism are no longer sufficient. Most approaches aim to make tourism more sustainable; consequently, new movements and activities are emerging. One aspect is that they pay greater attention to details and tourism businesses. Food and cuisine have always been inseparable from tourism. This is why “Gastronomy tourism”, as a professional term in the tourism sector, is on the rise. Many international organisations are providing data on these perspectives, such as the United Nations tourism ambassadors for Sustainable Tourism, who come from diverse fields, including sport, entertainment, business, gastronomy, and more. As leaders in their respective fields, they volunteer their time and voices to amplify the message of tourism for sustainable development and equal opportunity. In recent years, the number of ambassadors has continued to grow, reflecting the sector’s significance and diversity (<https://www.unwto.org/un-tourism-ambassadors>). Considering gastronomy as one of the tourist attractions, it is not solely about the dishes served, but also about the place and the people who are the hosts. From east to west, numerous efforts are made to create a positive impression for patrons as they enter, even if they are merely visiting for a meal. This experience is realised when all elements align—from the physical environment to the tastes and aromas, the hosts’ behaviour, and the lasting memories formed in that space. That is why every detail matters here: the designs, plates, cutlery—everything, as if one is a guest in a thoughtfully prepared welcoming home (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A sample of a home café in Moscow, serving traditional foods and desserts with homely cutlery and décor (photo from the author's archive, June 2018)

One of the well-known examples of gastronomy and tourism in Iran is Rasht, which has been recognised as a Creative City¹ of Gastronomy by UNESCO since 2015. The Heritage Museum emphasises the importance of traditional cultural expressions, such as crafts, folk art, and gastronomy, with a particular focus on the distinctive cooking techniques that use Gamaj clay pots. Gastronomy plays a vital role in fostering community ties and facilitating intercultural and intergenerational conversations, while also serving as a significant catalyst for sustainable connections between urban and rural areas and promoting economic growth. To support this initiative, the city offers long-term loans designed to assist farmers. Furthermore, Rasht offers numerous workshops and vocational training opportunities in gastronomy, highlighting the sustainable production and consumption of nutritious food (<https://www.unesco.org/en/creative-cities/rasht>). As a Creative City of Gastronomy, Rasht aims to establish a local food museum to preserve and showcase traditional Guilanese food products and recipes, highlighting the region's indigenous culinary heritage.



Figure 2. Rasht's local foods (<https://Isna.ir>)

¹ . For further reading on this concept, refer to “The Rise of the Creative Class” by Richard Florida.

The remarkable thing is that some of these spaces transcend mere establishments for food and drink; they serve as a creative central hub for gathering, experiencing, chatting, and fostering a sense of belonging. They are welcoming and enjoyable places for newcomers and locals alike. Over the years, sociologists and urban scholars have studied these spaces and proposed a new term to describe them, emphasising their characteristics. In the following, the concept of “third place” is described as one that can connect gastronomy tourism and urban studies within the cultural context.

3. Third place

While people in a bustling city spend time commuting and are occupied with work, some welcoming places open their doors to visitors, catering to the desires of both citizens and newcomers alike. A simple place to relax, chat with others, unwind from a hectic day, and enjoy the tastes and smells. Somewhere away from home, yet with the feeling of being at home. As urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg described, these places are the great and good places, the “third place”.

He describes seven features for the third place, which include the following items (Oldenburg, 1991; Carmona, 2007):

1. As a Leveller, 2. Conversation is the primary activity. 3. Accessibility and accommodation. 4. The regulars. 5. A low profile. 6. The mood is playful. 7. A home away from home. This is a place that is generally inclusive and open to the public, with no official criteria for exclusive membership. People often select their companions, friends, and acquaintances from those who are socially akin to their class. The finest characteristic of a third place is conversation. Lively, exciting, and engaging talk, accompanied by smiles, winks, handshakes, pats on the back, and various gestures, serves as an initial indicator of the joy of being in a third place. This enthusiasm is maintained and sustained through enjoyable and entertaining conversations.

Third places that provide the best and most comprehensive services are those where people can go at any time of day or night, confident they will encounter familiar faces or someone to converse with. In fact, for anyone wishing to visit a third place, accessibility, location, and the time of use are highly important. A third place, as a physical space, is often straightforward. These venues, with simple decorations and comfortable, homely, informal furnishings, promote equality among all and foster numerous social interactions. Part of this lack of pretence also encompasses clothing; patrons do not come here to change or dress up as they might at home, but rather attend as they are. The overall atmosphere of a third place is not serious. It is characterised by enjoyment and harmony, with the motivation to continue being together. Therefore, anxiety and dissatisfaction have no place in such environments. Finally, while there may be distinctions between a home, defined as the centre of family life and a social unit formed by collective living, and a third place, the third characteristic of a home as “a loving environment” aligns well with most third places. Psychologically and in terms of the emotional support it offers, a third place closely resembles a good home. These places serve as venues for meeting, connection, and socialising. People typically visit locations that resonate with their self-image, self-concept, and social values. When individuals encounter a place that supports their social values, it is classified as a type of “meaningful” third place (Sugiyama et al., 2015, cited in Joo, 2020: 337).

Many third places are viewed as facilitators for fostering relationships through formal or informal activities, providing a physical space for building communities within society and enhancing social cohesion (Cabras & Mount, 2017: 72). These locations aim to offer meaningful design that resonates with users who understand and appreciate these values. This is how the interactions formed in these spaces enable one customer to influence another. The shared values and sense of loyalty among the patrons of these places reinforce the feeling of a common purpose in cultivating this community, bringing people closer together (Meshram & O’Cass, 2018).

Oldenburg’s examples of third places include public spaces such as parks and plazas, as well as commercial spaces like cafés and pubs. This concept has also been applied to other semi-public places, including libraries, markets, chain restaurants, and even virtual spaces (Dolley, 2020: 3). Additionally, various studies from around

the world have examined other examples of the third place in their respective countries (Wohl, 2016; Dolley, 2020; Farash Khiabani & Shahabian, 2019). Many of these studies demonstrate that the connections formed in third places enhance relationships within neighbourhoods and various social groups, reduce loneliness and isolation, and foster a sense of security and belonging (Dolley, 2020: 3).

4. Methodology and background

Among the various research methods, this study employs a qualitative approach grounded in Creswell's five-category classification (Creswell, 2007). Of these five qualitative methods, this research selects ethnography as its approach. This research design facilitates broader investigations of individuals in diverse societies at both the city level and on smaller scales. As a qualitative approach, it centres on the stories shared by participants (Pardo & Prato, 2018: 38). In the urban context, urban ethnography emerged as a research method within the sociology department at the University of Chicago (Ocejo, 2013: 4-5).

It is essential to consider several key points during the ethnographic process. Time and its management are among the most critical factors, as the risk of inconclusive research is prevalent in ethnographic studies. Therefore, a specific timeframe should be established for this study. One of the most critical considerations in applying ethnographic methods is how to conduct the study from the outset to the conclusion. Thus, the process of implementing the method and the relationship with the ethnographer must be taken into account. A defining characteristic of the ethnographer is their long-term presence in the research context. In this study, considering that the researcher has been a frequent user and actively engaged in the studied spaces for over 10 years, spending considerable time in these environments and having served as a manager of one of these spaces for several years, along with previous studies conducted about these spaces, provides a strong foundation for familiarity with the places and their patrons. Following this, the research process is well-designed and illustrated in Figure 3.

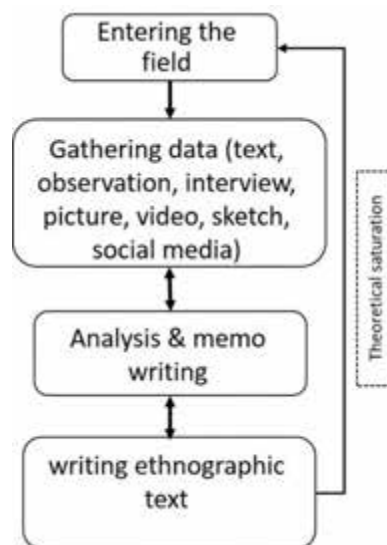


Figure 3. The process of applying the ethnographic approach (Farash Khiabani, 2021)

In applying the method within the cultural context of Tehran's central area, alongside the researcher's deliberate observations, 22 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted. It is essential to note that the conditions and interviews carried out during the research process prompted the researcher to utilise snowball sampling, also known as network sampling or chain referral sampling. This method entails introducing the next member or case after establishing a connection with one of the initial cases (samples) (Blaikie & Priest, 2018). The process of data analysis and coding in this research is depicted in Figure 4. Moreover, all diverse outputs of ethnographic work, despite their differences, involve producing text that includes ethnographic analysis not only as a cognitive activity but also as a form of writing (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 190). Thus, generating an ethnographic text is a key outcome of this research, which details the situation and functions of the studied locations.

• Interpreting and contextualising findings

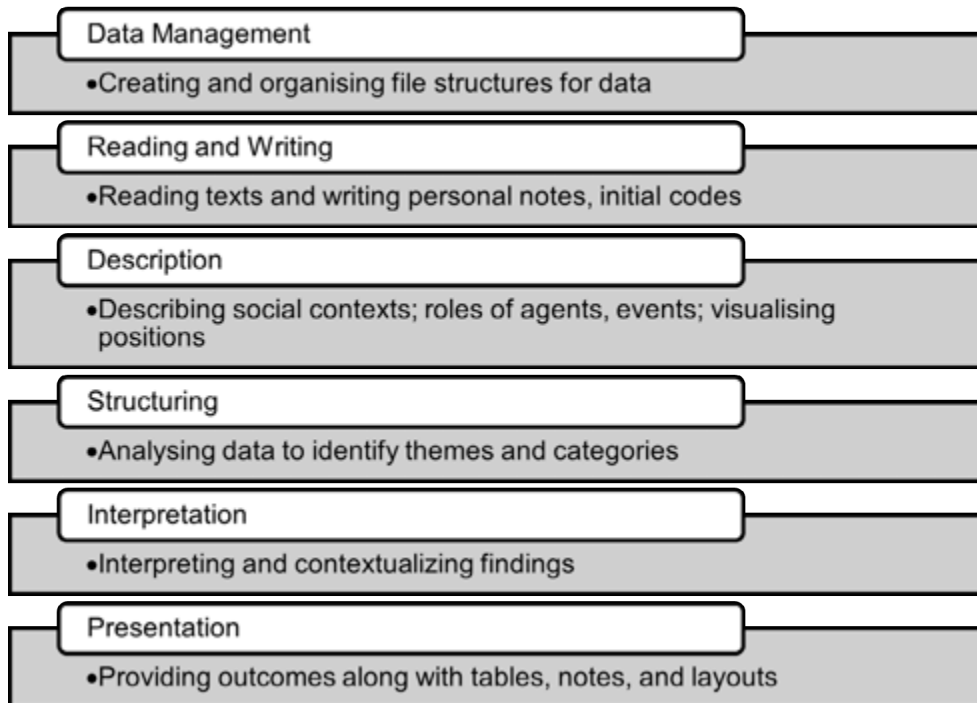


Figure 4. Data analysis and presentation based on the ethnographic research (based on Creswell, 2007).

Before exploring the contemporary cafés in Tehran, it may be beneficial to review various activities in cafes, their significance as tourist attractions, and their potential for future studies based on texts as this journey unfolds.

4.1. The potential of cafes

In the book 'The Starbucks Experience', the concept of the 'third place' is frequently referenced. While this book discusses the experience of this globally renowned coffee brand, the various store experiences worldwide affirm the brand's role as a third place from the author's perspective. Not only are the managers aware of this, but many customers across the globe also view these stores as their second home or the third place after home and work. Essentially, people enter environments where they feel personally valued and respected, fostering meaningful connections. Everything the coffee shop does is geared towards ensuring customers have a positive and perhaps joyful experience, whether it involves purchasing a quality drink or a food item. This third place must cultivate warmth and unique intimacy that set it apart from the first two places where most people reside, namely home and workplace (Michelli, 2006: 29). This is the very point that Christopher Alexander emphasises in his early sketches for the design of Lintz Café. He views the building as a place for ordinary people to rest. Every room, porch, and window is thoughtfully selected to create a comfortable environment—a place where each individual can feel completely at home (Alexander, 1981: 22).

Lintz Café is nestled in nature, embodying a distinctive identity shaped by its local surroundings. Referring to identity as the 'spirit', it is believed that the designer does not need to assign an abstract, intrinsic spirit to a place to create coherent meaning. In describing this place, Schulz considers the study of a locale as an examination of the events and occurrences that transpire there; thus, a collection of happenings, shapes, colours, smells, and textures forms the character or identity of a place. He establishes a connection between architecture, place, and cultural identity, asserting that the experience of being in a place is an experience of perceiving its meaning (Norberg-Schulz, 2000). These descriptions of certain well-known Western cafés serve as an introduction to high-

light their importance as essential and notable attractions. In the following, Tehran's cafés and their potential are viewed as inviting spaces for various groups.

4.2. Tehran's cafés

In numerous studies, Tehran is examined as a representation of political and social power (Farash Khiabani, 2021). The citizens of Tehran, possessing various forms of economic, social, and cultural capital, exhibit a significant degree of social control. A large portion of the country's population, comprising students or individuals with a university education and thus capable of influencing the masses, resides in this city. Cultural diversity and varying lifestyles should also be taken into account, as they contribute to the social fabric of this city. Conversely, Tehran's status as the capital and its centralist policies have fostered the multiculturalism of society, with the process of modernity being adopted here earlier than in other parts of Iran. In recent years, the renovation of old houses and shops for new commercial purposes has gained momentum, particularly in central Tehran. Recognising the value of these spaces and the interest from various artistic and cultural groups has significantly influenced this trend. The relationship between this perspective and the tourism sector is evident, as similar spaces can be found in cities such as Rasht, Isfahan, and Shiraz. These cities are part of an active tourism network rich in nostalgic signifiers and elements of Iranian identity, from architecture to cuisine. Tehran, along with the creation of small cultural spaces, presents imaginative and often fantastical representations of each of these cities.

In the history of this city, as the host of Iranian modern cafés (Figure 5), these establishments became venues for intellectuals and their gatherings. The modernisation process enabled women to visit cafés, transforming them into spaces that were no longer exclusively for men (Farash Khiabani & Goldar, 2024; Shahri, 1992)



Figure 5. Loghanteh Café, the symbol of Iranian modern Café, was located in the central district of Tehran during the Pahlavi period, as documented by the author from the Loghanteh Café Museum's archives in Tehran.

Tehran's cafés serve as valuable social hubs for local communities and are among the most popular tourist spots in Iran; however, they are unfortunately overlooked by the government. Despite this neglect, these venues, cherished by their patrons and supported by the private sector, have the potential to act as urban catalysts. By changing our perspective on them and recognising their capabilities, they can have a significant impact on the community. Since the 2010s, cafés have emerged as key symbols of contemporary culture, often maintaining a strong connection to historical identity with the aid of social media. Elements such as the cafés' interior and exterior design, including furniture, cutlery, and cuisine, significantly influence the business and are vital for attracting customers. The Digital Revolution has eliminated barriers, allowing cafés to cater to a broader audience beyond just students or specific social classes; they now accommodate families and people of various ages and backgrounds (Farash Khiabani & Goldar, 2024).

In Tehran, traditional Iranian buildings feature inward-facing courtyards, various rooms, porches, and balconies that protect against street noise, ensuring privacy and tranquillity. Cafés, galleries, bookstores, and mixed cultural spaces opening in old mansions represent new concepts that primarily change function without altering

the core elements of the original design and all building spaces during the reuse process. The narrative of space is equally significant. Some have been designed or created by renowned artists (such as the No. 14 gallery, by Nezam Ameri, a student and colleague of Frank Lloyd Wright), while others have left a lasting impression in users' minds. Regrettably, some of these spaces are losing their identity due to government mismanagement, and the private sector has been increasingly active in recent decades. By repurposing these locations as cafés or cultural hubs, a vibrant tourism movement is emerging in the central area of Tehran (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Reconstruction of a house and reusing it as a café (a sample of home-café) in the centre of Tehran by traditional and authentic Iranian items (photo by the author, April 2025)

One of the main special features of these places is their menu, which serves traditional Iranian foods and drinks. More so than typical restaurants, they offer local dishes from various regions of Iran, spanning from the north to the south (Figure 7). They celebrate the value of local or seemingly simple foods, such as Ab-Dugh-Khiar, Panir-Bu-reshte, and Baghali-ghatogh from Northern Iran, Bandari sandwich from the south, and Gheime-nesar from the centre, among others. Even some of the items that serve both cold and hot drinks are traditional Iranian items that are not easily found in other countries.



Figure 7. Panir boreshteh and Mirzaghasemi, Northern Iranian traditional foods, served in one of the central home-cafes in Tehran (Photo by the author, May 2025)

5. Discussion

This study's examination of Tehran's contemporary cafes reveals a tourism destination that emphasises a specific type of tourism: gastronomy. This cultural aspect serves as one of the attractions of these spaces, showcasing all their cutlery, accessories, furniture, and more (Figure 8). These destinations offer opportunities for postmodern tourism, thanks to their diverse attractions, including local interactions, historical sites, varied tourist demographics, authentic experiences, nostalgia, and small-scale businesses. By analysing customers' and visitors' perceptions of Tehran's contemporary cafes, particularly home cafes, over the past decade on social media (primarily through Instagram in Iran), we aim to uncover insights into the destination's image, including any shifts from traditional or luxury restaurants to a friendly, cosy, homely experience.

The account given by the sample interviewee about their experience at one of the locations during a semi-structured interview is as follows:

(A one-hour conversation with a 35-year-old woman):

"Whenever I have free time between my activities and since there's no chance to go home, the best option is to visit a café, enjoy a comforting drink or meal, read a book, have an engaging experience, and pass the time until my next task. The cosy atmosphere of this café makes it feel less formal than a restaurant. I love the aroma of coffee, traditional foods, and the rows of books nearby. Those who arrive here typically seek culture, a sense of familiarity, and a friendly atmosphere. Although my home is on the north side of the city (Pasdaran), I travel to the city centre for work, to visit cafés, and to socialise. This area is more my hangout spot; I feel a stronger connection with the people here. Music has also influenced my attraction to this environment; it is calming".



Figure 8. The collection of traditional kitchen items in Khaneye 1308 Café in Tehran (photo from the author's archive, January 2022)

Even during special periods like Ramazan, some café menus have changed to serve traditional items, regardless of whether one is fasting or not; these fresh and nostalgic offerings can capture customers' attention (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Persian Eftar in a café, special foods for Ramazan (Sangak bread, cheese, date, zoorbia bamie, soup and a cup of tea) (Photo by the author, April 2025)

5.1. Coding process

It is important to note that in qualitative research, the researcher employs classification-based reasoning alongside intuitive and implicit interpretations to identify findings that appear similar or evoke a sense of likeness, allowing for their grouping (Saldana, 2013: 14). Thus, the coding process can be tailored to align with the specific needs of the study (Ibid: 102). Table 1 illustrates the coding process employed in this research, as described in the methodology section, which facilitates the emergence of categories and themes, ultimately culminating in a

textual description of the cafés studied, along with the cultural context that develops within them.

One of the key features of the third type of spaces examined is the potential for dialogue and interaction within these environments. Cafés lead the way in this aspect. They have successfully attracted a diverse clientele across various age groups. Notably, those cafés situated in historic houses with open spaces and courtyards have managed to maintain a vibrant atmosphere and enjoy greater popularity compared to others that lack such elements. Beyond facilitating conversations among acquaintances, these spaces also promote interactions with strangers, fostering the formation of new connections. Social tables, individual and co-working areas, social tables, and conversations following meetings all provide opportunities for interaction among individuals who may not know each other. These venues create an environment conducive to familiarity and dialogue around shared interests. They play a significant role in shaping identity, while also being influenced by the identities of their users. This reciprocal relationship is highly effective in the development and evolution of these spaces.

Table 1. A sample of the coding process

Initial Coding	Categories	Themes
Chatting	Conversation	Authenticity
Conversation		
Friendly space	Entertaining and nice	Aesthetic
Laughter and happiness		
Calm environment	Peaceful	Friendly
Serene atmosphere		
Cozy place	Safety	Creativity
Free costume		
No unwelcome gazes or disparaging remarks in contrast to other public or semi-public spaces	Freedom	Cultural vibe
Acting freely, without any authority		
Different groups	No judgement	Variety, Diversity
Easy to get by public transport or on foot	Accessibility	
Nostalgic items: cutlery, cups, plates, furniture,	Nostalgia	Originality
Original tastes and smells	Originality	
Traditional and folk music	Genuineness	Identity
Homy styles and smells	Identity	
Well-designed (building, furniture, cutlery, etc.)	Creativity	Beauty
Close to the essence of nature in the area, such as having a yard, flowers, and ponds	Natural and fresh	

Many of the dishes served in these cafés showcase authentic recipes from various Iranian regions, often presented in traditional settings. The café format lends validation to their authenticity. Furthermore, the inclusion of a selection of Iranian cold and hot beverages, crafted from herbal extracts, enhances the cafés' menus, making them exceptional, genuine, and diverse. These offerings are seldom found in luxury restaurants, allowing tourists to experience the authentic flavours of Iran. The cafés create a remarkable environment for new generations to connect with their cultural heritage while catering to contemporary needs, establishing them as post-modern destinations. The primary themes identified through the coding process characterise these venues as authentic, aesthetically mindful, creative, and friendly, all wrapped in a vibrant cultural atmosphere.

5.2. The ethnographic text

Elaboration and description of the study's findings, along with drafting the text, are considered critical stages in the ethnographic research process. In this method, the ethnographer, much like a writer, must craft a compelling narrative. The author's preferences and skills greatly influence the language and style employed in the writing. This text can take various forms, including a tale, description, analysis, interpretation, or thematic narration (Creswell & Poth, 2018: 442-443). While the primary draft of the text arising from this research is extensive, a sample paragraph summarising the key findings is provided below:

In today's Tehran, many downtown cafés have transformed into more than just establishments along the street; they have become homes away from home. These cafés seamlessly blend various activities, evolving into vibrant social and cultural hubs. They host exhibitions, sell cultural and artistic products, and provide spaces for dialogue and connection, offering a cosy and inviting atmosphere. These venues embody a particular way of life, serving not only a diverse selection of food and drinks but also functioning as platforms for interaction and conversation.

Several of these cafes are situated in historic buildings that resonate with Iranian identity, where the atmosphere, music, furniture, and decorations highlight traditional Iranian elements. Others are strikingly modern, embodying Tehran's contemporary character. Despite their visual disparities, all these establishments strive to be vibrant gathering places for socialising, storytelling, and the affirmation or reconstruction of cultural identity. Additionally, each cafe caters to its specific audience.

A notable aspect of these cafes is their function as places for a brief respite and relaxation. A primary reason for their widespread popularity is the prevailing sense of simplicity and intimacy within their atmosphere. From the exterior façade to the interior design, furnishings, details, and even the staff's attitude, there is an aura of authenticity and modesty. Luxurious or ostentatious elements have no place here. These characteristics contribute to making these spaces feel more like "homes." As a result, the food culture in these cafes often embodies a sense of homeliness and reflects local values.

Traditional Iranian beverages, including herbal syrups and native distillates from various regions, are favoured over sodas and modern drinks. Alongside international cuisines, local dishes from different Iranian ethnic groups are served, enriching the menu. Iranian stews and even forgotten recipes, which are seldom found in restaurants, play a crucial role in enhancing the dining experience. Older patrons visit these establishments to relive nostalgic memories and enjoy flavours that evoke their childhood homes, reminiscent of their grandmothers' cooking. Meanwhile, younger generations seek to connect with a bygone era, immersing themselves in the food and ambience of neglected spaces as they craft their own Iranian identity within a vibrant modern city, essentially searching for a piece of home.

In today's world, these cafés go beyond being simple establishments for dining and refreshments; they embody a "third place"—an enriching experience that few other venues can provide. These spaces offer a harmonious blend of colours, aromas, and flavours, set against an authentic backdrop enriched by the depth of Iranian culture, lending a greater significance to the experience.

6. Conclusion

Over the past two decades, cafés have become one of the main attractions and tourist destinations in the heart of Tehran. The recognition of the importance of Iranian vernacular architecture has spurred a movement to renovate historic buildings into vibrant cultural spaces and cafés. This repurposing of heritage homes not only helps in preserving the city's historical elements—both tangible and intangible—but also enriches the urban landscape. The flourishing economy has fuelled the aspirations of these café ventures, transforming them into sought-after locales.

These inviting venues offer a unique ambience that feels like home, allowing patrons to escape the chaos of the city. Visitors can engage with their surroundings, participate in informal activities and conversations, and connect with a diverse range of social groups. Cafés provide a sanctuary from modern loneliness, fostering a sense of security and belonging within the community. Notably, it is not just the architecture and physical features that attract visitors; the food, tableware, décor, and intricate details of culinary traditions are also celebrated, nurturing a deep appreciation and respect for the culture.

For many, these cafés evoke a sense of nostalgia, reminding them of the traditional Iranian image of old brick houses surrounded by lush gardens filled with fresh food and beverages. For newer generations, they symbolise a sense of meaning, identity and belonging to a setting that contrasts with their previous environments. While many cafés have devoted patrons, they also foster a welcoming atmosphere for newcomers. The establishments in historic Tehran serve a crucial function as tourist attractions, having evolved to accommodate contemporary demands in culinary offerings and cuisine. This adaptability not only enhances the cultural landscape but also fosters an environment that is both vibrant and inviting. By blending innovation with authenticity, these venues create a rich and immersive experience for visitors, thereby contributing significantly to the city's unique cultural identity.

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