

Article

Unveiling Regional Identity Through Restaurant Menus: An Exploratory Study of Signature Dishes in the Okanagan Valley (British Columbia, Canada)

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Abstract

This study examines how regional gastronomic identity is expressed through restaurant menus in the Okanagan Valley, designated in October 2025 as Canada's first UNESCO City of Gastronomy. This article aims to assess the emergence of a regional gastronomic identity and the potential recognition of a signature dish. An exploratory sequential mixed-methods approach was used to collect data from 40 restaurants, where 283 main dishes were selected and analyzed. These data were coded primarily to identify recurring compositional structures and emerging ingredient patterns. Several recurring compositional templates appear across restaurants, structured around shared protein–starch–sauce configurations. Although they remain occasional, their repetition across restaurants points to the early formation of a recognizable gastronomic identity. This identity does not rely on a single signature dish but takes shape through shared dish structures that recur across menus. These patterns contribute to ongoing discussions in gastronomy tourism by showing how regional identity can develop through distributed and processual culinary practices. The study shows how menu analysis provides a valuable lens for understanding the development of such an identity in emerging gastronomic destinations.

Keywords: regional food identity; gastronomy tourism; menu analysis; dish composition patterns; signature dish; terroir expression; Okanagan Valley

1. Introduction

Gastronomy tourism has become an essential vector of regional development, cultural identity, and destination attractiveness [1]. Gastronomy contributes to the creation of a sense of place by enabling visitors to engage with local culture, production systems, and territorial resources [2,3]. This evolution has repositioned gastronomy tourism beyond mere consumption, emphasizing its role as a meaningful cultural practice through which destinations communicate distinctiveness and authenticity. Gastronomy operates as a symbolic system through which communities' express identity, sustainability, and creativity [4,5]. Over the past two decades, gastronomy tourism has become a strategic asset for tourist destinations. For example, in 2024, the global market was valued at about US\$1.8 billion. By 2033, it is expected to exceed US\$8 billion. This represents an average annual growth rate of 18% [6]. This rapid growth shows how gastronomy tourism now plays a central role in destination branding. Experiential elements shape how places are perceived while helping destinations stand out in a competitive global market [7,8].



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On 31 October 2025, Kelowna was designated as a City of Gastronomy within the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. This recognition highlights the strength of the Okanagan Valley: a flourishing gastronomic scene and ecosystem, a strong agricultural base, and a dynamic wine industry, all grounded in innovation and sustainability. Across the world, wine regions such as Napa Valley, Sonoma, or Tuscany place gastronomy at the center of their regional brands, where food, wine, and tourism work together to shape lifestyle and visitor experiences. The Okanagan Valley follows a similar path in Canada. Wine, agriculture, gastronomy, and tourism intersect to form a shared regional identity [9]. The region offers a relevant setting to examine how gastronomy practices express place. Chefs, producers, winemakers, and policymakers work closely together to translate terroir into gastronomy.

In this context, restaurants function as key cultural intermediaries that connect local production with visitor experience. Their menus constitute a particularly revealing medium of expression through which chefs and establishments articulate their relationship to place. The concept of the signature dish captures this interplay between individual creativity and collective regional representation. A signature dish symbolizes the synthesis of a chef's artistry and a region's distinctive resources, operating as a communicative artifact that links gastronomy, culture, and territory [10,11]. While this concept has been examined in relation to chefs' creativity and tourists' perceptions, its empirical manifestation through restaurant menus remains underexplored. However, menus are powerful semiotic artifacts that define identity through language, structure, and the choice of ingredients [12,13]. Through various descriptions (origin, composition, and gastronomic presentation), menus influence how diners interpret local culture and authenticity. This makes them a valuable empirical source for the study of gastronomic identity.

This study thus contributes to the literature on identity and gastronomy tourism in several ways. First, it moves beyond iconic ingredients and emblematic dishes. Instead, it uses a menu-based approach. This approach shows how regional identity emerges through recurring textual and structural patterns. The focus shifts from ingredient counts to compositional logics and menu narratives. In doing so, the study extends research on signature dishes and gastronomic representation. Then, the paper addresses a gap in the literature. It examines an emerging gastronomic destination. Most previous studies [1,3] focus on famous regions with distinct gastronomic identities. Finally, the study looks at a region where gastronomic identity is still taking shape. This makes it possible to observe how gastronomic identity is built, negotiated, and communicated at an early stage. It captures identity formation before a gastronomic canon becomes fixed.

This study therefore investigates whether a region's signature dish can be identified through the systematic analysis of restaurant menus and ingredient narratives. By focusing on the Okanagan Valley, an emblematic case of wine-driven gastronomy and, since 2025, Canada's first UNESCO City of Gastronomy, the study examines how textual and structural elements of menus reveal regional gastronomic identity and the potential emergence of shared gastronomic signatures. Rather than assuming the existence of a single signature dish, the study explores whether regional gastronomic identity may instead emerge through the cumulative repetition of shared compositional logics across menus. The central research question guiding this study is: *To what extent can a region's signature dish be identified through the analysis of restaurant menus and their ingredients in the Okanagan Valley?*

2. Literature Review

2.1. Gastronomic Identity, Place-Making, and the Language of Gastronomy

Gastronomy operates as a bridge between culture, economy, and landscape, transforming territorial resources and traditions into experiences of belonging and distinction.

Within the field of gastronomy tourism, it functions as a language of place through which regions express identity, authenticity, and creativity [5,14]. Local food systems have been described as interfaces connecting sustainability, heritage, and identity [1]. Emphasizing provenance and seasonality not only differentiates destinations but also reinforces ecological and cultural integrity. In this sense, gastronomy contributes directly to processes of place-making by translating local resources into communicable cultural meanings.

Following Hjalager [15], gastronomy can also be understood as an innovation system that integrates local entrepreneurship, creativity, and resource valorization. Similarly, Bessière [16] emphasizes the role of gastronomy in the social construction and symbolic promotion of territory. For Kivela and Crotts [17], gastronomic identity has become a key component of destination image and competitiveness, linking the sensory and cultural dimensions of travel. Gastronomy is therefore both material and symbolic [5,18], as it simultaneously engages with tangible processes of food production and the intangible meanings attributed to origin, authenticity, and craftsmanship [18]. Recent research further confirms that gastronomy increasingly relies on innovation and creativity as strategic drivers of regional differentiation [19,20].

Empirical studies suggest that these dynamics are particularly visible in regions where agriculture, tourism, and gastronomy entrepreneurship intersect. In such contexts, gastronomic identity emerges through the interaction of local production systems, creative practices, and narrative framing [9,15]. The Okanagan Valley provides a relevant illustration of this configuration, where agriculture, viticulture, and gastronomic entrepreneurship combine to produce distinct cultural narratives embedded within gastronomy tourism [9].

In this perspective, gastronomy contributes to the construction of a collective identity that is simultaneously rooted in landscape and continuously reinterpreted through creativity [21,22]. Building on this premise, the present study assumes that identity markers, notably provenance, ingredient origin, and lexical expressions of place, can be empirically observed through menu language. Menus thus serve as concrete expressions through which regional gastronomic identity is articulated and communicated, offering observable indicators of an emerging regional gastronomic identity.

2.2. Restaurants as Mediators of Gastronomy, Place, and Experience

Restaurants play a central role in the cultural mediation of gastronomy by transforming agricultural and artisanal products into meaningful sensory and symbolic experiences [3]. They act as interpretive spaces where local resources, cultural values, and creative practices converge to articulate regional identity [14,16]. Through gastronomic composition, menu design, and atmosphere, restaurants translate the relationship between place and product into narratives of authenticity and belonging [23]. In this sense, restaurants function as key sites of mediation where gastronomic identity is actively constructed and communicated rather than passively represented.

Within the framework of the experience economy, dining can be understood as a form of staged storytelling, in which food becomes both performance and interpretation [11,16]. Menu language, plating, and pairing operate as discursive tools that allow chefs to express the landscape, climate, and heritage of a region in tangible form. Such gastronomic experiences construct symbolic bridges between local production and visitor imagination [18], while local food functions as a key vehicle for the communication of authenticity and place identity [18]. These expressive elements leave observable traces through which the relationship between cuisine and place can be analytically examined.

Previous research [1,16] further highlights how restaurants function as narrative interfaces between producers, chefs, and consumers. In fact, the restaurant setting allows culinary professionals to reinterpret traditional resources through creative expression,

thereby shaping the image of a destination. In this context, restaurants are not merely commercial spaces but cultural intermediaries that materialize the dialogue between tradition and innovation [15]. Their menus offer a concrete entry point for examining how this mediation process operates in practice, as their ability to balance terroir, creativity, and storytelling makes restaurants instrumental in the co-construction of a region's gastronomic identity.

2.3. Signature Dishes and the Communication of Place

The concept of the signature dish embodies the intersection between individual creativity and collective regional expression. It represents not only a chef's personal identity but also a symbolic translation of place through taste and presentation, linking gastronomic creation to territorial meaning [1]. A signature dish can be defined as a gastronomic creation that reflects innovation, artistry, and an emotional connection to territory [15]. Some researchers further extend this framework by demonstrating how signature dishes operate as destination-marketing tools, transforming local authenticity into communicable and marketable cultural symbols [24]. As such, signature dishes function as condensed expressions of place, capable of translating complex territorial narratives into recognizable gastronomic forms.

Recent scholarship distinguishes between signature dishes and signature ingredients, a differentiation that is central to this study [24]. While the former embodies the creative agency of chefs, the latter anchors authenticity through the repetition and recognizability of local products. The recurrent use of certain ingredients across multiple restaurants consolidates the symbolic capital of those components, contributing to the perception of a shared gastronomic identity and illustrating how food heritage and repetition transform local products into gastronomic emblems of place [11,16]. Parallel evidence from related fields supports this mechanism of symbolic reinforcement. In the wine industry, provenance and repetition function as powerful semiotic tools for establishing authenticity [25]. Similarly, when regional products and dishes are consistently referenced across menus and narratives, they gradually evolve into gastronomic signifiers that embody collective memory and identity [8,16]. These processes leave observable traces within menu texts and dish descriptions, where repetition, recognition, and reinterpretation ultimately transform local food into a marker of regional distinction [1,11].

2.4. Menus as Semantic and Methodological Artifacts

Menus are not merely operational documents listing gastronomic offerings; they are semiotic artifacts that encode how restaurants conceptualize and communicate cultural identity [26,27]. Through lexical choices, syntactic structures, and the presence or absence of geographic markers, menus function as "texts of place," narrating the relationship between food, territory, and authenticity [28,29]. Their language, tone, and visual form mediate the connection between chefs and diners, transforming ingredients into symbols of origin and belonging [24]. In this respect, menus operate as strategic communicative devices through which restaurants articulate their positioning within a regional foodscape.

Authenticity in gastronomy is often communicated through linguistic cues of provenance, as highlighted by Sims [28]. Terms such as *local*, *farm-raised*, *Okanagan-grown*, or *BC wild* act as indicators of territorial identity. These discursive markers function as cultural signifiers, linking everyday gastronomic practice to broader narratives of regional distinctiveness [26]. Menu language thus becomes a strategic tool of place branding, conveying not only the quality of products but also the values, ethos, and creativity of a region's food culture [29]. Such linguistic signals provide observable markers through which claims of authenticity and place attachment can be systematically examined.

In methodological terms, menus can be treated as both communicative and analytical artifacts. Their textual composition, structure, and patterns of ingredient reference offer measurable data for examining how regional identity is expressed through discourse [24,27]. Recent research on menu cognition further demonstrates how linguistic framing and descriptive cues influence perception, interpretation, and emotional engagement [30,31]. By systematically mapping the recurrence of ingredients, descriptors, and territorial markers across menus, it becomes possible to empirically trace how gastronomic identity is collectively constructed rather than individually asserted. This approach aligns with recent calls in gastronomy tourism research to integrate linguistic and semiotic analysis into empirical studies of gastronomic representation [26,28].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study follows an exploratory sequential mixed-method design, in which an initial qualitative phase informs a subsequent descriptive quantitative analysis. Following Creswell and Plano Clark [32], the qualitative phase was used to identify linguistic, structural, and thematic patterns within menu data, which then guided the construction and selection of variables for quantitative description. This design is particularly appropriate for emerging research fields, such as regional gastronomic identity, where theoretical frameworks remain underdeveloped and inductive exploration is required.

The research is divided into two complementary phases. The first phase was qualitative and inductive in nature and served as a preparatory step for the main descriptive analysis. The objective was to identify linguistic markers, thematic patterns, and recurring expressions related to provenance, ingredients, and menu framing to support the development of the coding framework. The analysis focused on dinner menus and main-course dishes to ensure consistency and comparability across restaurants and to concentrate on items that are most representative of gastronomic identity and central to restaurant positioning. The qualitative phase thus provided the conceptual and lexical foundations necessary for identifying potentially emblematic dishes, ingredients, and compositional cues within the dataset.

The second and principal phase consisted of a descriptive quantitative analysis, designed to examine the distribution and recurrence of the indicators identified during the qualitative phase. IBM SPSS Statistics version 29 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) was used to quantify frequencies and percentages for variables related to restaurant characteristics and menu content. These variables included restaurant type, menu structure, suggested food and wine pairings, dish names and descriptions, and references to local products or regional provenance. This descriptive approach made it possible to examine how expressions of local identity vary across different restaurant contexts, including urban fine-dining establishments and winery-based restaurants. By quantifying recurring patterns rather than testing causal relationships, the analysis directly supports the research objective of assessing whether certain ingredients or dish configurations collectively contribute to the emergence of a regional signature.

This exploratory sequential mixed-method design is well adapted to contexts where empirical models remain limited and conceptual categories are still evolving [32]. The study adopts a constructivist perspective. It treats authenticity, terroir, and creativity as socially produced rather than fixed. Qualitative interpretation is combined with descriptive quantification. This approach helps explain how regional gastronomic identity takes shape through menu language, ingredient choices, and dish composition.

3.2. Study Area and Sampling

The study focuses on the Okanagan Valley in southern British Columbia (Canada). This valley runs approximately 200 km in length. In addition, it enjoys a growing reputation for its vineyards, orchards, and local gastronomy. Its climate, lakes, and diverse agriculture make it one of Canada's most notable gastronomy regions. This context provides relevant research setting for better understanding how regional gastronomic identity is reflected on restaurant menus.

Restaurants were selected purposively to capture the Okanagan's leading fine-dining venues. This approach ensured representation of the region's local sourcing practices. The objective of this sampling approach was not statistical representativeness, but analytical relevance, consistent with the exploratory nature of the study [33]. Selection criteria required that each restaurant:

- (1) Operate year-round.
- (2) Hold a fine-dining or upscale positioning.
- (3) Provide a publicly accessible and current dinner menu.
- (4) Display an explicit or implicit link to local or regional products.

These criteria ensured a consistent level of gastronomic sophistication while remaining aligned with the study's objective. They primarily allowed the study to maintain its focus on menus as cultural expressions of the region.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected between September and October 2025. As the primary source, restaurant websites were used to obtain complete and current dinner menus. Only publicly available material was used, in accordance with ethical standards for secondary online data. Each menu was archived in digital format to ensure traceability, transparency, and replicability of the analytical process [32,33]. When multiple versions were available, the most recent dinner menu was selected to guarantee temporal consistency across all cases.

To maintain analytical clarity, the dataset included only dinner menus and their main-course (*entrée*) sections, as these typically feature a restaurant's most emblematic dishes. Starters, desserts, and tasting menus were deliberately excluded to reduce variability and focus on items that best represent each establishment's gastronomic identity. This focus was essential for addressing the research question, as main courses are the most likely to express the characteristics of a potential signature dish [23].

For each restaurant, seven key variables were extracted and coded:

- (1) Geographical location.
- (2) Type of restaurant (wine-estate or urban fine dining).
- (3) Number of dishes listed under the main-course section.
- (4) Presence or absence of a suggested pairing.
- (5) Core ingredient defining the dish's identity.
- (6) Dish name and description.
- (7) Presence of a regional or territorial reference (e.g., Okanagan, BC, local).

These variables capture the study's dual focus on menu structure and ingredient-based identity markers, making it possible to examine both linguistic and compositional dimensions. They were first organized in Microsoft Excel and then imported into SPSS (version 29) for descriptive statistical analysis. This process ensured coherence across data extraction, coding, and quantitative processing [33].

3.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis followed a structured, multi-step procedure applied to the coded menu dataset [32]. This section focuses exclusively on the analytical steps used to extract descriptive and structural patterns, while broader methodological and design considerations are addressed in Section 3.1.

Variables included in the analysis were derived from the qualitative coding phase rather than defined a priori, ensuring that analytical categories reflected linguistic, structural, and communicative features empirically observed in the menu data. Linguistic dimensions of menu content, such as ingredient prominence and lexical framing, have been widely examined as indicators of gastronomic meaning and identity [14]. Structural elements, including recurring compositional patterns, are similarly recognized as central to the organization and interpretation of menus [27]. Menus also function as communicative artifacts through which restaurants articulate place, authenticity, and positioning, reinforcing their relevance as analytical material [13,26].

In the first step, qualitative coding was applied to each dish name and description to identify recurring lexical and structural elements. These included key adjectives, place references, ingredient prominence, and compositional cues. The outcomes of this coding process directly informed the operational definitions of variables used in subsequent analysis, ensuring continuity between qualitative interpretation and quantitative description.

In the second step, the coded data were analyzed descriptively using SPSS. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to describe the distribution of the selected variables across the sample. This descriptive approach was consistent with the exploratory objective of the study, which aimed to identify patterns of recurrence rather than to test causal relationships.

A third analytical step focused on dish composition as a structural unit of analysis. Dishes were grouped based on recurring combinations of proteins, starches, vegetables, and sauces. Iterative comparison across the dataset was used to identify repeated structural patterns, such as beef paired with potatoes and jus or salmon combined with seasonal vegetables and a butter or citrus-based sauce. The descriptive and structural results were then synthesized to highlight recurring ingredient patterns and broader compositional logics.

These repetitions provided an empirical basis for assessing whether a regional gastronomic signature is emerging in the Okanagan Valley, by revealing shared structures that extend beyond individual restaurants.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

All data used in this study were obtained from publicly online sources such as restaurant websites. No direct interaction with human participants occurred or confidential information was collected. Because the research relied exclusively on secondary data in the public domain, formal ethical approval was not required.

The study followed recognized standards for digital and qualitative research ethics by systematically documenting data provenance and focusing on aggregated patterns rather than on individual establishments. No restaurant-level evaluation or comparison was conducted, and findings are reported at a collective level only. This approach ensured compliance with institutional and international guidelines for the ethical use of secondary data [24].

4. Results

4.1. Structural Overview of Menus

Table 1 offers an overview of the restaurant sample and the characteristics of the menus examined.

Table 1. Structural Overview of Menus (N = 40 restaurants/283 dishes).

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
<i>Restaurant type</i>	Urban fine dining	26	65.0%
	Wine-estate dining	14	35.0%
<i>Menu size</i>	Minimum	2	—
	Maximum	11	—
	Mean	7.08	—
<i>Suggested pairings</i>	Yes	10	25.0%
	No	30	75.0%
<i>Terroir mentions</i>	Yes	81	28.6%
	No	202	71.4%

The dataset comprises 40 establishments, the majority of which are classified as urban fine-dining restaurants (65.0%), while just over one third operate as wine-estate dining venues (35.0%). Menu size varies over the sample, with the number of main courses ranging from a minimum of two to a maximum of eleven dishes, and an average of 7.08 items per menu. Only a quarter (25.0%) of the menus include suggested food and beverage pairings, indicating that three quarters (75.0%) of establishments do not provide this type of guidance to diners. Mentions of terroir remain limited. It appears in 28.6% of menu descriptions. In contrast, 71.4% of restaurants do not include any such reference. This indicates that references to “terroir” are present in some menus but are not used consistently across the region’s restaurant offerings.

4.2. Analysis of Dish Titles (Main Ingredients)

Table 2 summarizes the main ingredients most often featured in dish titles across the 283 dishes analyzed. It presents the dominant proteins while showing how they distribute across the full sample.

Table 2. Most Frequent Main Ingredients Identified in Dish Titles (N = 283).

Main Ingredient	Frequency	Percent
Chicken	33	11.7%
Beef (all cuts)	32	11.3%
Pasta	16	5.7%
Lamb	14	4.9%
Salmon	13	4.6%
Duck	13	4.6%
Other (remaining items)	162	57.2%

The table outlines the main ingredients cited in dish titles. Chicken (11.7%) is the most mentioned food, followed by beef (11.3%). Each account for slightly more than a tenth of the dishes. Further down the list are pasta (5.7%) and lamb (4.9%), followed by salmon (4.6%) and duck (4.6%), which are mentioned somewhat less often. The remaining dishes are grouped under “other” and represent 162 items, or 57.2% of the sample. Rather than a menu offer dominated by a single ingredient, these figures point to a handful of recurring proteins coexisting with many less frequent components.

4.3. Analysis of Dish Descriptions (Techniques and Components)

An overview of the most frequent elements appearing in dish descriptions, covering cooking techniques, sauces, starch components, and vegetable components, is presented in Table 3 to summarize the main compositional features used across the 283 main course dishes.

Table 3. Summary of Dish Description Components (N = 283).

Component Type	Category	Frequency	Percent of 283 Dishes
<i>Techniques</i>	Roasted	49	17.3%
	Grilled	22	7.8%
	Charred	18	6.4%
	Seared	17	6.0%
	Confit	15	5.3%
	Other techniques	50	17.7%
<i>Sauces/Liquid Elements</i>	Sauce (generic)	78	27.6%
	Jus	24	8.5%
	Demi	18	6.4%
	Glaze	8	2.8%
	Beurre/beurre blanc	6	2.1%
	Other sauces	9	3.2%
<i>Starch Components</i>	Potato(es)	73	25.8%
	Rice	31	11.0%
	Mashed	23	8.1%
	Gnocchi	14	4.9%
	Other starches	19	6.7%
<i>Vegetable Components</i>	Mushroom(s)	55	19.4%
	Vegetables (generic)	52	18.4%
	Spinach	12	4.2%
	Broccolini	11	3.9%
	Other vegetables	31	10.9%

Roasted is the most mentioned technique (17.3%). It is followed by grilled (7.8%) and charred preparations (6.4%). Finally, seared (6.0%) and confit (5.3%) are cited less. Sauces and liquid components are most often referred to in generic terms (27.6%). More specifically, juice (8.5%), demi-glaze (6.4%), glaze (2.8%), and beurre blanc or other butter-based sauces (2.1%) are the other types of sauce mentioned. Potatoes described in general terms appear in 25.8% of dishes, while mashed potatoes (8.1%) and gnocchi (4.9%) are less frequent. Rice is also present in a notable proportion of dishes (11.0%). Vegetable components follow a similar pattern. Generic references to “vegetables” are the most common (18.4%), followed by mushroom(s) (13.8%), spinach (4.2%), and broccolini (3.9%).

Overall, these figures provide a snapshot of the descriptive vocabulary most used by restaurants when presenting their main-course dishes.

4.4. Shared Regional Dish Patterns

An overview of the most frequently recurring dish configurations, formed by combinations of proteins, starches, vegetables, and sauces, is presented below to summarize the main compositional patterns observed across the 283 dishes (see Table 4).

The analysis identified several recurrent configurations that appear across multiple restaurant menus. As shown in the table, the most frequent pattern consists of beef served with a potato component and a jus or demi-glaze (4.6%), followed by combinations pairing beef with roasted vegetables and potato (3.5%) or with mushrooms and sauce component (2.5%). Duck dishes often feature a fruit-based reduction accompanied by root vegetables (2.5%), and less frequently include a potato component paired with jus (1.8%). Dishes featuring fish (salmon, sablefish, or cod) commonly appear with seasonal vegetables and a beurre blanc or citrus-derived sauce (3.2%). They may also be served with rice and vegetables (2.5%). Lamb dishes are often paired with polenta or rice and roasted vegetables (2.1%). The same is true for lamb with potato and jus (1.8%). Chicken dishes frequently appear paired with mashed potatoes and vegetables (2.8%).

These frequencies summarize the dish combinations that occur most consistently across the menus and reflect the configurations most often employed in structuring main-course offerings.

Table 4. Most Frequent Dish Configurations Identified Across Menus (N = 283 dishes).

Protein Category	Recurrent Configuration (Elements Combined)	Frequency	Percent of 283 Dishes
Beef	Beef + potato component + jus/demi-glace	13	4.6%
	Beef + roasted vegetables + potato	10	3.5%
	Beef + mushrooms + sauce	7	2.5%
Duck	Duck + fruit reduction (e.g., cherry, fig, berry) + root vegetables	7	2.5%
	Duck + potato + jus	5	1.8%
Fish (Salmon, Sablefish or Cod)	Fish + seasonal vegetables + beurre blanc or citrus sauce	9	3.2%
	Fish + rice + vegetables	7	2.5%
Lamb	Lamb + polenta/rice + roasted vegetables	6	2.1%
	Lamb + potato + jus	5	1.8%
Other Proteins	Chicken + mashed potato + vegetables	8	2.8%

4.5. Signature Dish Candidates

An overview of the most recurrent dish patterns appearing across different restaurants is presented below to identify which configurations occur frequently enough to be considered potential regional signature dish candidates (see Table 5).

Table 5. Frequency of the Most Shared Regional Dish Patterns (N = 283 dishes).

Potential Signature Dish Configuration	Frequency	Percent of 283 Dishes
Beef + potato component + jus/demi-glace	13	4.6%
Salmon/Sablefish + seasonal vegetables + beurre blanc/citrus sauce	9	3.2%
Duck + fruit reduction + root vegetables	7	2.5%
Chicken + mashed potato + vegetables	8	2.8%
Fish (any) + rice + vegetables	7	2.5%
Lamb + polenta/rice + roasted vegetables	6	2.1%
Other recurrent configurations	17	6.0%

The analysis shows that a limited number of dish patterns recur across multiple establishments. As reported in Table 5, the most frequent configuration is beef served with a potato component and a jus or demi-glace (4.6%). Fish-based patterns appear next, with salmon or sablefish paired with seasonal vegetables and a beurre blanc or citrus-derived sauce (3.2%), followed by fish served with rice and vegetables (2.5%). Duck combined with a fruit reduction and root vegetables appears in 2.5% of dishes, and chicken served with mashed potatoes and vegetables appears at a similar frequency (2.8%). Lamb-based configurations, including lamb with polenta or rice and roasted vegetables (2.1%), also appear across several menus.

These values summarize the dish patterns most shared among restaurants and represent the configurations most likely to be considered as emerging regional identifiers.

5. Discussion

5.1. From Common Foods to Emerging Gastronomic Structures

The findings of this study suggest that, in emerging gastronomic destinations, regional identity is less expressed through signature dishes than through the repetition of shared compositional structures across restaurant menus. This discussion deliberately centers on gastronomic identity as expressed through restaurant menus and recurring compositional

structures. Related concepts such as terroir, innovation, storytelling, and destination branding are mobilized as interpretive lenses rather than as independent analytical objects.

A central contribution of this study lies in distinguishing between commonly used foods and the emergence of shared gastronomic structures across restaurants. The descriptive results show that ingredients such as beef, salmon, chicken, and potatoes are widely present across menus, reflecting dominant fine-dining conventions rather than a distinctive regional gastronomic signature [3,8,18]. For example, beef- and salmon-based dishes together account for a substantial share of the 283 main courses analyzed, yet their presence alone does not differentiate the Okanagan from other contemporary fine-dining destinations. This supports earlier work in gastronomy tourism suggesting that ingredient prevalence alone does not constitute cultural meaning or place-based identity [1,21].

Rather than identifying a single signature dish, the analysis reveals the recurrence of specific compositional patterns, notably protein–starch–sauce configurations that appear across multiple restaurants. Although each of the three recurring templates identified represents only a small proportion of the dataset (approximately 2.5% to 4.6% of main-course dishes), their repetition across different restaurants is analytically significant. These patterns suggest the emergence of shared gastronomic logics rather than isolated creative coincidences. This observation reinforces the arguments advanced by Harrington and Ottenbacher [34] and Harrington [35], who emphasize that gastronomic identity is shaped less by isolated ingredients than by recurring compositional structures and creative conventions.

These findings also resonate with more recent perspectives [20,22] that conceptualize gastronomic identity as dynamic and practice-based rather than fixed or heritage-bound. In emerging destinations, gastronomic identity often develops through repeated practices and shared repertoires before crystallizing into formally recognized signature dishes [10]. In this sense, the Okanagan Valley illustrates how common foods can serve as the raw material for more meaningful gastronomic expressions when embedded within recurring structural frameworks, rather than functioning as symbolic markers on their own [24].

5.2. Shared Dish Architectures, Creativity, and Regional Identity

Beyond ingredient frequency, the results highlight the importance of shared dish architectures in shaping regional gastronomic identity [25]. The identification of recurring combinations of proteins, vegetables, starches, and sauces points to underlying gastronomic grammars that structure menu offerings across the region. While no single structural configuration dominates the menus, the three recurring compositional templates identified collectively account for approximately 10% of all main-course dishes, despite being distributed across a diverse set of establishments. Their presence across both urban fine-dining restaurants (65% of the sample) and wine-estate restaurants (35%) indicates a meaningful degree of coherence across different gastronomic contexts.

Such shared architectures align with the notion of “identity dishes,” whereby recognition emerges incrementally through repetition across venues rather than through immediate codification [34]. Importantly, these patterns coexist with strong creative variation, allowing chefs to preserve individual expression while still contributing to a collective regional narrative. This dynamic reflects findings from studies on gastronomic innovation, which emphasize that creativity often operates within shared structural boundaries rather than in complete isolation [15,19].

From a destination perspective, these results extend existing work on gastronomy tourism and place branding [1,8,36]. Rather than relying on a signature dish, destinations may construct their gastronomic identity through systems of practices that visitors gradually associate with place. The Okanagan Valley thus reflects broader trends in con-

temporary gastronomic destinations, where identity is shaped through consistency and recognizable patterns across restaurants rather than through the canonization of a single heritage dish [9,20].

5.3. *Terroir, Menu Language, and the Processual Nature of Signature Dishes*

The study further contributes to the literature by clarifying how *terroir* and locality are communicated through menu language. Despite the strong agricultural and wine-producing context of the Okanagan Valley [9], explicit references to local provenance appear in only 28.6% of dish descriptions. This relatively low proportion highlights a notable gap between the material importance of local production systems and their explicit textual representation on menus.

This finding corroborates prior research suggesting that *terroir* often operates implicitly, embedded in ingredient availability, seasonality, and gastronomic conventions rather than systematically articulated through explicit geographic claims [18,28,37]. Menus therefore function as semiotic and strategic artifacts that mediate between local production systems, chef creativity, and visitor perception [13,26,27]. Selective references to place allow restaurants to balance authenticity with broader fine-dining aesthetics, reinforcing the idea that menus are narrative devices rather than neutral listings of dishes [29,31].

Importantly, these results suggest that signature dishes are better understood as processes rather than outcomes. In emerging gastronomic destinations, gastronomic identity appears to take shape through gradual alignment among ingredients, structures, language, and creative practices, rather than through the immediate establishment of a single emblematic dish. The relatively limited use of explicit *terroir* markers, combined with the recurrence of shared compositional structures, indicates an early stage of identity formation, in which meaning is conveyed implicitly and collectively. Shared gastronomic structures thus provide a flexible foundation upon which more explicit signature dishes may eventually crystallize through repetition, recognition, and coordination among actors [10,22,38].

This processual understanding of signature dishes contributes to ongoing debates in gastronomy tourism by empirically demonstrating how identity is collectively constructed over time rather than inherited or declared. It also highlights the temporal and relational nature of gastronomic identity formation, suggesting that menus capture a snapshot within an evolving system shaped by seasonality, production cycles, and ongoing experimentation [1,25].

Taken together, these findings suggest that regional gastronomic identity in emerging gastronomic destinations is less a matter of formal designation than of cumulative alignment among menu structures, narrative cues, and shared creative practices.

6. Conclusions

This study shows that regional gastronomic identity can emerge without a single, formally recognized signature dish. Instead, it takes shape through the repeated use of shared compositional patterns across restaurant menus. Based on an analysis of main-course menus from 40 Okanagan Valley restaurants, this study explores signs of a regional signature dish among the 283 dishes examined. No single signature dish emerges from the patterns observed. Instead, a small number of recurring structures stand out, collectively suggesting a regional gastronomic identity shaped through repetition with variation. These configurations recur across establishments, notably beef paired with potatoes and jus or demi-glace; salmon or sablefish combined with seasonal vegetables and *beurre blanc* or citrus-based sauces; and duck accompanied by fruit reductions and root vegetables. Although these configurations remain relatively infrequent (ranging from 2.5% to 4.6% of dishes), their repetition across multiple venues points to the early formation of “identity

dishes,” in which recognition emerges progressively through recurrence rather than formal codification. These patterns align with conceptualizations of gastronomic signatures as creative yet recurring expressions of place and identity rather than fixed regional icons [34,35].

These findings feed into larger discussions around gastronomic identity and destination branding in tourism studies. By looking past simple ingredient counts to recurring dish structures and recurring configurations, the analysis pushes forward what we know about signature dishes in places still finding their gastronomic footing. In line with Richards [1] and Hjalager [15], the results support the view that contemporary regional identities are increasingly shaped through systems of practices, creative routines, and shared representations, rather than through singular signature dishes. In the Okanagan context, gastronomic identity materializes through recurrent structural logics that organize menu composition and meaning, rather than through fixed or canonical recipes. This finding resonates with Harrington and Ottenbacher’s [35] conceptualization of gastronomic signatures as emergent, context-dependent expressions of place, shaped by chef agency and environmental constraints, as well as with Harrington’s [34] notion of “identity dishes,” whereby repetition across venues gradually constructs shared expectations without requiring formal codification. By empirically demonstrating how identity emerges through repetition, variation, and narrative coherence, rather than through ingredient prevalence alone, this study reinforces the distinction between common foods and signature dishes [24] and contributes to ongoing discussions on gastronomy as a communicative resource in destination branding and tourism development [1,15,17].

From a communicative perspective, the results also emphasize the role of menus as narrative devices. Rather than functioning solely as operational tools, menus act as vehicles of gastronomic storytelling through which regional identity is gradually constructed and stabilized. The repeated use of shared dish structures reads like implicit storytelling, where meaning emerges through repetition, coherence, and variation over time rather than explicit branding claims [10]. This approach aligns with recent work presenting storytelling [39] as a mechanism for shaping meaning, recognition, and emotional engagement in tourism contexts [11]. In the Okanagan, gastronomic identity takes shape less through formal labels and more through these cumulative narrative signals embedded in everyday menu practices.

Like any study, this research has limitations. The analysis draws on descriptive statistics to spot recurring patterns, though these cannot support inferential tests or causal claims. Therefore, the findings remain suggestive rather than conclusive. It centers solely on menu texts, bypassing chefs’ intentions or diners’ actual perceptions. Data collection also captures just a snapshot, not a full year, given the seasonal nature of Okanagan restaurants and their menu shifts with ingredient availability. Taken together, these limitations suggest that regional gastronomic identity in the Okanagan remains dynamic and evolving rather than fixed. It seems to be shaped by ongoing influences rather than locked into any fixed form.

Future research could expand upon these findings in several complementary ways. First, qualitative interviews with chefs or restaurateurs would help to better understand the creative intentions and symbolic meanings underlying menu design [40]. Second, conducting longitudinal studies of menus across seasons and over several years would allow researchers understand more in depth how recurring gastronomy patterns develop and adapt in response to agricultural cycles and tourism dynamics [41]. Also, a “stakeholder” perspective could be relevant. This would help understand how chefs, producers, winemakers, tourism groups, and local institutions interact to shape and promote potential regional signature dishes, and local gastronomic culture more broadly. Such approaches [22] would help clarify how collective action and shared narratives shape the long-term formation of a

gastronomic identity in emerging tourism destinations. Finally, further studies might examine how UNESCO City of Gastronomy status relates to or connects with the emergence of regional signature dishes. While the designation doesn't rely on one signature dish, it could shape how gastronomic identities get formalized and shared over time [42]. Longitudinal or comparative studies across UNESCO Creative Cities could then trace whether, and how, this kind of recognition helps stabilize, highlight, and spread common dish patterns.

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