



# Taste, Stories, and Culture: How Foreigner Represent Indonesian Cuisine on YouTube Channel “Abroad and Hungry”

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**Abstract.** Indonesian cuisine, as a rich and diverse cultural expression, is now increasingly recognized worldwide through digital platforms such as YouTube. This study analyses the representation of Indonesian cuisine on the YouTube channel *Abroad and Hungry*, managed by Italian creator Max Ginestra. The study focuses on three main videos featuring cuisines typical of three major cities: Surabaya, Semarang, and Medan. This study aims to (1) analyse how the narrative of “foreigners trying local food” shapes cultural understanding; (2) examine how *Abroad and Hungry* represents the distinctive cuisines of these three cities in the context of local culture and identity; and (3) explore how digital interactions through audience comments contribute to shaping collective cultural meaning. The method used is virtual ethnography, which combines in-depth analysis of video content (narrative, visuals, cultural symbols) and audience interaction in the comments section. The results show that Ginestra not only presents a sensory experience but also constructs a deep cultural narrative. Through the perspective of Media Ecology, YouTube is understood as a communication environment that transforms food from mere objects of consumption into representations of digital culture.

**Keywords:** media ecology; digital ethnography; channel Youtube *Abroad and Hungry*; food and culture.

## 1 Introduction

Indonesian cuisine is one of the richest and most diverse expressions of culture, reflecting a long history of ethnic mixing, traditions, and global influences. From home-cooked meals to street food, the cuisine of the archipelago not only fulfils nutritional needs but also serves as a symbol of identity, social values, and cultural heritage passed down across generations. The cuisine served in each region of Indonesia displays authentic characteristics that differ from one another, even though they offer similar culinary menus. Food is more than just nutrition. Its preparation, presentation, and consumption is a multifold communicative practice which includes the meal's design and its whole field of experience (Food Media–Senses, 2023). In the context of digitalisation, globalisation and the way people understand and access culture— including

through food—has shifted significantly. Digital media platforms, particularly YouTube, have become important spaces where Indonesian culinary culture is represented, consumed, and reinterpreted by a global audience. Cuisine is showcased not only through dishes but also through how the food is prepared and eaten.

One YouTube channel that has had a major influence in introducing local cuisine to the international market is @abroadandhungry. It is hosted by a foreign creator named Max Ginestra, originally from Italy, who explores street food in various countries. The channel is known for its authentic, honest, and respectful approach to local culture. During his visit to Indonesia, @abroadandhungry featured a lot of culinary content, as it did in India, Greece, Turkey, and Indonesia. However, the author only selected three cities with strong culinary characteristics: Surabaya, Semarang, and Medan. Through three main videos—‘The Spicy Death Rate of Indonesian Street Food in Surabaya’, ‘Exotic Nasi Goreng, Extreme Bakso, and Best Ayam Goreng – Indonesian Street Food in Semarang’, and ‘Street Food Indonesian in Medan’—the channel not only presents a sensory experience of tasting food, but also builds a narrative that connects taste with culture, history, and social interaction.

A food vlogger is someone who actively uses social media, particularly YouTube, to upload videos reviewing the taste, texture, location, and price of food. Not only that, food vloggers also share the history, philosophy, cooking methods, and ingredients of the food they eat during their meals. This creates an interesting and appetising picture for viewers (Fatrisia, 2025, p. 32).

In Surabaya, the narrative revolves around the challenge of taste, especially the spiciness of street food such as tahu tek, lontong balap, and spicy chicken feet. With a provocative title—‘Spicy Death Rate’—this channel uses a dramatic approach to attract attention, but behind it lies an effort to understand the culture of spicy food that is ingrained in the daily lives of the people of East Java. The creator's physical reactions, dialogues with vendors, and explanations of the local context shape the narrative that spicy flavours are not just a sensation, but part of regional identity and local pride.

In Semarang, the content emphasises flavour diversity and cultural fusion. Semarang's savoury fried rice, chewy giant meatballs, and crispy spiced fried chicken symbolise the acculturation of Javanese, Chinese, and Arabic cultures. Narratives such as ‘exotic’ and ‘extreme’ are used not only as a draw but also as a way to pique the curiosity of a global audience. However, on the other hand, these terms have the potential to construct local food as ‘extraordinary’ or ‘strange’, which can cause ambivalence between cultural appreciation and exoticisation. It is possible that the creator made such a title to represent the diverse culinary tastes of Semarang.

Food in the tradition of *saparan bekakak* is interpreted as a form of gratitude blessings, a medium of communication with ancestors for safety, cultural enlightenment, and strengthening solidarity/togetherness. There are variations and shifts in the meaning of food in the *Saparan Bekakak* tradition, encouraging the negotiation of meaning, which catalyses the renewal and strengthening of identity (Setyaningsih et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, in Medan, culinary representations highlight the diversity of ethnic groups living side by side. Crispy egg martabak, richly spiced Medan soto, fresh durian, and fragrant bika ambon provide a window into understanding the Malay, Batak, Javanese, and Chinese communities. In this video, *Abroad and Hungry* showcases warm

interactions with the local community, emphasising the hospitality, diversity, and uniqueness of the cuisine that is hard to find elsewhere. This representation shapes the image of Medan as a city with dynamic and authentic cuisine.

Some YouTube channels run by foreigners that discuss Indonesian cuisine are @thelostboys, @peoplevsfood, and @abroadandhungry. @thelostboys is a travel channel that not only discusses cuisine in various cities in Indonesia, but also highlights aspects of social life, local culture, regional history, nature, and local community activities. Although most of the content features culinary exploration, the focus of each video tends to be diverse and inconsistent with one main theme. This diversity of topics makes @thelostboys account interesting to watch, but less than ideal as a research object that requires focus and thematic consistency. The variety of content, which includes cuisine, history, culture, nature, and social life, has the potential to make it difficult for researchers to determine specific analysis variables and limits the scope of the research.

Therefore, the author chose @abroadandhungry as the research object because it has a clearer and more consistent content focus, particularly on the theme of culinary. This consistency allows the author to conduct a more targeted, in-depth, and systematic analysis in line with the research objectives.

Based on these phenomena, this study, entitled ‘Taste, Stories, and Culture: The Representation of Indonesian Cuisine on the Abroad and Hungry YouTube Channel’, aims to analyse: (1) how the narrative of ‘foreigners trying local food’ shapes cultural understanding; (2) how Abroad and Hungry represents the cuisine of three cities—Surabaya, Semarang, and Medan—in the context of culture and identity; and (3) how digital interactions through comments and audience responses collectively shape cultural meaning.

The selection of Surabaya, Semarang, and Medan was based on both analytical and theoretical considerations. Although the Abroad and Hungry channel features culinary content from many Indonesian cities, these three were chosen for their distinct culinary identities, historical significance, and representation of intercultural dynamics. They reflect not only regional differences but also the complexity of Indonesia’s multicultural society.

## 2 Literature Review

This study is guided by several interrelated theoretical perspectives. First, Intercultural Communication Theory is central to this research. Since the channel explores culinary practices in various Indonesian cities such as Surabaya, Semarang, and Medan, intercultural communication theory helps explain how food becomes a medium for cultural exchange. The interaction between the foreign content creator and local communities reflects processes of meaning-making, negotiation of cultural identities, and the sharing of traditions through gastronomy. Referring to Igor Klyukanov’s view, intercultural communication is an ongoing process of negotiating meaning. In this context, Ginestra not only tastes food, but also translates sensory experiences—flavours, aromas, textures, and atmospheres—into narratives that can be understood by a cross-cultural au-

dience. Language choices such as flavour descriptions and the use of global terminology demonstrate how Indonesian culinary meaning is constructed through a process of cultural interpretation: “Intercultural communication is not simply the exchange of messages between people from different cultures, but a continuous process of meaning negotiation shaped by cultural contexts, symbols, and interaction.” (Klyukanov, 2005).

Second, the study draws on Media Ecology Theory (McLuhan, Postman), which emphasises that media not only transmit content but also shape cultural perceptions and social interactions. McLuhan, a leading figure in the media centric approach, argues that ‘the medium is the message’—meaning it is the medium itself, not just its content, that has a major impact on society. In his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), McLuhan shows how every medium, by its form and structure, reconfigures human sensory balance and social organisation. One of McLuhan’s most famous quotes is: ‘The medium is the message.’ With this, McLuhan meant that the medium itself—not just the content conveyed through the medium—plays an important role in shaping the way we think, act, and understand the world (Rose, 2024, p. 5).

In the digital age, YouTube functions not as a neutral carrier but as an active cultural environment. As Nasrullah (2014) states, virtual ethnography explores how people build relationships and patterns, and how these function through the medium of the internet. This approach is essential for understanding how digital platforms enable new forms of cultural storytelling. This limitation—of prior studies focusing solely on content without considering platform affordances—risks overlooking the complexity of cultural representation in digital media. By adopting a virtual ethnographic approach, this study addresses these limitations in two ways:

It highlights the intercultural dimension of food content creation and reception on YouTube. It examines the performative role of media platforms in shaping how cultural identities and culinary practices are mediated and understood globally.

### 3 Research Method

In this study, the main data comes from:

1. **YouTube video content:** documentation of culinary trips in Surabaya, Semarang, and Medan. The videos were analysed from a visual, verbal, narrative, expressive, and cultural symbol perspective (e.g., the greeting ‘andiamo’, the use of batik, eating with hands, etc.).
2. **Viewer comment columns:** as a form of digital interaction, the comments show the audience's response to how Ginestra introduces Indonesian cuisine, their perceptions of culture, and the construction of Indonesian culinary identity in the global space.

The analytical framework integrates content analysis and discourse analysis, situating findings within Media Ecology and Intercultural Communication theory. The research follows virtual ethnographic principles as outlined by Nasrullah (2022), which involve immersion in digital spaces, attention to communicative patterns, and sensitivity to cultural context.

## 4 Results and Discussions

In this study, the author wishes to examine the YouTube channel *Abroad and Hungry*, which features culinary coverage from various countries. Some of the countries visited include Indonesia, Greece, Turkey, Italy, and India. The host of the YouTube channel *Abroad and Hungry*, Ginestra, has his own unique style of presenting culinary content.

This uniqueness is evident in his communication style, appearance, and the way he appreciates every culinary dish he encounters. In each video, he always opens the encounter with his signature greeting, ‘andiamo’, which has become his identity. In addition, he often wears batik, a symbol of Indonesian culture, as a form of appreciation and closeness to the local community. Batik is a craft with high artistic value and has become part of Indonesian culture (especially Javanese), which has been a legacy of the Indonesian ancestors since ancient times (Binti, 2018, p. 59). Ginestra also shows familiarity with Indonesian dining culture, for example by choosing to eat with his hands. He does not hesitate to try spicy sambal, which is often a characteristic of Indonesian dishes. When describing food, he has the ability to explain the contents of the dish in detail and describe the taste clearly. Instead of just using simple words like ‘delicious’ or ‘tasty’, he conveys the nuances of taste, texture, and aroma of the food in depth so that viewers can imagine the culinary experience he is having.

A polite and respectful attitude is also a prominent feature in each of his shows. Ginestra always greets restaurant owners or vendors warmly and compliments them on the dishes they serve. When there is food that he finds unsuitable to his taste, he never criticises it with negative words, but instead conveys his criticism subtly without being condescending. The admiration he shows for the cuisine of each region emphasises his respect for Indonesia's culinary diversity.

White says that culture is something extrasomatic—a temporal continuum of things and events dependent upon symboling. Specifically and concretely, even in detail, he said that culture consists of tools, implements, utensils, clothing, ornaments, customs, institutions, beliefs, rituals, games, works of art, language, etc. In fact, White's definition is almost the same as E.B. Tylor's. It is just as detailed—the only difference being the elements emphasised. For example, clothing, tools, ornaments (art), rituals, games, language. White seems to have created a definition that is easier to understand (Pandjaitan, 2014). Through this unique approach, Ginestra not only introduces Indonesian cuisine to an international audience, but also presents Indonesian culinary culture as something valuable, interesting, and worthy of The dishes Ginestra chooses to sample on each visit are not just any dishes, but menus that are considered representative of the culinary identity of the local area.

For example, when in Surabaya, he tried various signature dishes that are deeply ingrained in the local food culture, such as fried duck with spicy sambal, Pak Jayen's legendary tahu telur, squid fried rice, Cak Tono Kertajaya's Lamongan chicken soup, and Mak Yeye's authentic sego sambel. All of these dishes reflect the diversity and uniqueness of Surabaya's cuisine, which is known for its spicy, savoury flavours and generous portions. The selection of dishes also represents the dynamic culinary culture of the people of Surabaya, who are open to variety and place great importance on flavour—especially sambal, which is an essential element in every dish. By presenting

these various menus, Ginestra not only showcases the diversity of the food, but also builds a narrative about the colourful culinary identity of the people of Surabaya, which is rich in spices and closely linked to the daily traditions of its citizens.

When visiting the city of Semarang, Ginestra once again showcased a variety of culinary delights that represent the identity of the local community. He tasted Bustaman goat curry, which is famous for its strong yet light spiced sauce, Pak Supar's fried chicken, which is crispy on the outside but tender on the inside, and Bu Fat's legendary manyung head stall, which serves spicy and savoury manyung fish head dishes typical of the coast. Not to be missed, he also tried Pak Ripto's Kesonpuro beef meatballs, which are simple yet rich in flavour, and Atsar's babat fried rice, which has become a culinary icon of Semarang due to its tender babat and distinctive seasoning.

This variety of cuisine reflects the distinctive characteristics of Semarang cuisine, which is rich in spices and combines savoury, sweet, and slightly spicy flavours. As a port city and trade centre, Semarang's culinary culture is shaped by a blend of influences, including Javanese, coastal, Chinese, and Arabic. This is evident in the diverse dishes, ranging from spiced goat meat, seafood dishes, to fried rice-based dishes with a regional twist.

The culinary culture of Semarang's people reflects an open, adaptive, and welcoming attitude towards diverse culinary influences. Semarang residents tend to enjoy food with family or friends as a form of togetherness, while also appreciating local culinary traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. Through the culinary choices he tried, Ginestra successfully described Semarang as a city with layers of rich flavours, combining the warmth of local traditions with cultural diversity present in every dish.

While in Medan, Ginestra sampled a number of popular dishes that have become icons of the city's culinary tourism. He tried the distinctive Medan Warintek vegetable rice cake with its savoury coconut milk sauce and various side dishes, Kesawan soto with its spicy Malay-Chinese flavour, and the simple but famous Methodist noodle soup with its fresh broth. Not to be missed, he also experienced the sensation of enjoying Ucok durian, a world-famous culinary icon of Medan, followed by Wajir Seafood with its fresh seafood dishes with an archipelago flavour, and putu bambu, a sweet and soft traditional snack.

This array of culinary delights showcases Medan as one of the largest culinary tourism cities in Indonesia, where Malay, Batak, Chinese, and Indian cultural influences blend to create a unique wealth of flavours. Medan's cuisine is generally known for its strong flavours, rich spices, savoury tastes, and boldness, both in main dishes and traditional snacks.

The culinary culture of the people of Medan also reflects their open, expressive character and their love of enjoying food in a warm atmosphere with family and relatives. The existence of legendary restaurants and street food stalls that continue to thrive is part of the city's identity, reinforcing Medan's image as a diverse and authentic culinary destination.

By showcasing Medan's signature cuisine, Ginestra successfully emphasises that this city is not merely a stopover but a hub for gastronomic experiences that blend culture, history, and unforgettable flavours.

#### **4.1 Media Ecology Perspective on @abroadandhungry Channel**

Within the framework of Media Ecology, YouTube is understood not only as a medium for delivering content, but as a communication environment that shapes the way people see, feel, and understand cultural reality. The presence of the Abroad and Hungry channel, with its coverage of street food in Semarang, Surabaya, and Medan, demonstrates how digital media plays an active role in constructing a new ecosystem of meaning around Indonesian cuisine.

This transformation reflects McLuhan's notion that the medium shapes perception: Indonesian cuisine is no longer experienced primarily as a local, embodied practice, but as a global digital spectacle. The frequent use of reaction shots, descriptive language, and emotional expressions in Ginestra's videos illustrates how YouTube privileges immediacy, affect, personalization in and cultural representation.

#### **4.2 The medium as a cultural environment**

YouTube as a medium creates a space where local cuisine is no longer limited to consumption by the local community but becomes part of global discourse. Through algorithms and digital distribution, signature dishes such as Bustaman goat curry from Semarang, fried duck from Surabaya, and durian from Medan are presented as cultural artefacts consumed by audiences across countries.

#### **4.3 The foreigner's perspective as a 'cultural lens'**

Ginestra, as a foreign national who is fluent in Indonesian, becomes a cultural mediator. He does not just eat, but also gives ratings using unique terms such as 'ILLEGAL' (meaning very tasty, rating 10). For viewers, this foreigner's perspective is important: it provides the experience of 'seeing oneself through the eyes of an outsider.' Thus, Indonesians gain a new reflection on their own cuisine, which is seen as special and valuable from a global perspective. One example is when Ginestra tries catfish head with spicy sambal, which tastes like smoky fish. He even tasted lalapan, a dish of steamed cassava, and otak-otak. 'All kinds of fish prepared in certain ways become favourite choices that are delicious to eat together' (Agoes Tinus, 2022, p. 207).

#### **4.4 Representation of cultural values through behaviour.**

Ginestra also displays representations of Indonesian culture through his actions: wearing batik, greeting people warmly, behaving politely, and showing appreciation to the shop owner. Within the framework of media ecology, this behaviour shows how Indonesian cultural values are reproduced and displayed in the digital environment, so that the audience not only learns about food, but also about Indonesian social norms and ethics. Culture is a dynamic entity, constantly evolving with the passage of time, technology, and intercultural interactions. Globalisation has had a major influence on cultural development around the world, including in Indonesia. Cultural exchange through trade, migration, and media has enriched local cultures with foreign elements, creating

unique cultural hybrids. However, globalisation also brings challenges, especially in terms of preserving local cultural identity (Nursillah, 2024).

#### 4.5 The language of taste as a construction of digital experience

Ginestra's descriptions of food—'mama mia,' 'this is bomb,' 'seafoody,' 'spicy,' 'buttery,' 'melty'—are not just adjectives, but part of the construction of sensory experiences in the digital space. In the context of media ecology, this language serves to create an immersive experience: even though viewers cannot taste the food directly, they can 'feel' it through the detailed narratives presented on YouTube.

#### 4.6 The language of taste as a construction of digital experience

Viewers who respond to Ginestra's content in the comments section become part of the media ecology itself. They are not merely consumers, but also co-creators of meaning—giving testimonials, sharing personal experiences, or reaffirming their pride in Indonesian cuisine. Thus, media ecology is formed through the dynamic relationship between the medium (YouTube), content (cuisine), communicator (Ginestra), and audience (global-local viewers). Analysis of viewer comments shows that audiences often express pride, curiosity, and emotional attachment to the food being presented. Local Indonesian viewers frequently reaffirm the authenticity and cultural value of the dishes, while international audiences articulate fascination and desire to experience Indonesian cuisine firsthand.

#### 4.7 Food as Cultural Representation in Abroad and Hungry

**Food as local identity.** Each city covered—Semarang, Surabaya, Medan—is represented through its signature dishes. For example, Bustaman goat curry from Semarang, fried duck with sambal from Surabaya, and durian from Medan. These dishes are not just 'delicious food,' but representations of local identity: the savoury-sweet-spicy flavours of Semarang as a multicultural coastal city, the spicy flavours of Surabaya as a reflection of its vibrant community, and Medan's durian as an icon of pride for a city known for its expressiveness and openness.

**Food as a medium of cultural communication.** When Ginestra eats a dish and describes its taste in detail ('spicy,' 'buttery,' 'creamy,' 'melty'), he is actually translating local culture into a global language. These words become a bridge between local sensory experiences and the understanding of an international audience. Thus, food becomes a cross-cultural language that everyone can understand, regardless of their background. Ginestra is also able to describe everything he eats, such as lontong, offal, curry, spicy crisps, vermicelli noodles, sambal, risol, grouper, prawns in salted egg sauce, steamed flour and brown sugar, chilli, peanut sauce, fermented shrimp taste, and mushy textures.

**Eating behaviour as a representation of values.** The way Ginestra eats with his hands, greets vendors politely, or wears batik also reinforces that cuisine does not stand alone. There are cultural values represented: hospitality, respect for the host, and Indonesian-style familiarity. So, food not only represents taste, but also ethics, lifestyle, and ways of socialising. In analysing Ginestra's culinary videos, the author also noticed several differences. When Ginestra ate in Javanese areas such as Surabaya and Semarang, the vendors' style or response was more refined, calm, and showed gestures of bowing—as Javanese people are very respectful of guests who come to visit. This is slightly different when Ginestra greets the restaurant owner in Medan, whose response is a bit stiff and quiet. This is because Medan people are typically bold and assertive.

**Audiences as co-producers of representation.** Through comments, likes, and shares, audiences help reinforce this representation. Local residents feel proud that their cuisine is recognised, while international audiences connect with Indonesian culture through digital experiences. Thus, food becomes a medium of collective representation: local identities are produced, consumed, and exchanged in the digital space. The entertainment and media industries often package local or traditional cultures to attract a wider market. To elaborate further, this phenomenon can be seen in the way local cultures that were originally practised in traditional contexts, such as dance or music, are transformed into products tailored to global market tastes (Almahdali, 2025).

Referring to Igor Klyukanov's view, intercultural communication is an ongoing process of negotiating meaning. In this context, Ginestra not only tastes food, but also translates sensory experiences—flavours, aromas, textures, and atmospheres—into narratives that can be understood by a cross-cultural audience. Language choices such as flavour descriptions and the use of global terminology demonstrate how Indonesian culinary meaning is constructed through a process of cultural interpretation. “Intercultural communication is not simply the exchange of messages between people from different cultures, but a continuous process of meaning negotiation shaped by cultural contexts, symbols, and interaction.” Igor Klyukanov (2005).

## 5 Conclusion

This study communication contributes studies, to cultural studies, and digital ethnography by emphasising that food can be interpreted as a representation of culture as well as a means of global communication. Through virtual ethnography and Media Ecology analysis, the research reveals how *Abroad and Hungry* constructs Indonesian cuisine not only as edible objects but as carriers of history, identity, and social values. Max Ginestra functions as a cultural mediator whose performance—through embodied language, dress, gesture, and affect—activates intercultural dialogue and reaffirms the global relevance of local culinary traditions.

The limitations of this study lie in the number of videos and comments analysed. Further research could expand the scope of the study, compare similar channels (e.g., @thelostboys, @peoplevsfood), or further examine the role of global audiences in

shaping the meaning of digital cuisine—especially through quantitative analysis of comment sentiment or cross-platform engagement.

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