

‘Caiçara’ Cuisine On The Islands Of Paraná Coast, Brazil: Between Limits And Possibilities

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Abstract:

Background: Caiçara cuisine is a gastronomic expression typical of the coastal region of Brazil, especially in the Paraná State region. It combines Indigenous, African, and Portuguese influences, reflecting local culture and ingredients. The Paraná Coast has approximately 20 islands, distributed along its coast. Some of the best-known islands include Ilha do Mel, which is part of the region with a preserved area complex. One of the characteristics of the residents of this community is the transmission of traditional knowledge from generation to generation. Based on these statements, this study sought to identify the socioeconomic profile of the individuals who offer this cuisine as a source of income and highlight the main typical dishes that comprise this tradition, as well as how Caiçara cuisine presents authentic experiences for the tourists. Furthermore, the research analyzed the perceptions of those involved regarding the opportunities and sustainability of Caiçara cuisine in the development process of this island.

Materials and Methods: This research adopted a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, with an exploratory and descriptive approach. It was conducted in-person at Ilha do Mel between August 2024 and June 2025. Semi-structured questionnaires, with closed and open questions, were administered in person at the 30 establishments offering traditional caiçara cuisine.

Results: The study revealed that articulating gastronomy with tourism in a planned manner means opening paths for residents themselves to become protagonists of tourist reception, valuing their knowledge and generating income in a sustainable manner. With adequate institutional support, Caiçara cuisine could be consolidated as a vector of regional development, as it has the potential to attract tourists, as it seeks to offer authentic experiences that preserve cultural traditions.

Conclusion: The opportunities to transform Caiçara cuisine into a driver of sustainable development are promising, according to the interviewees. Promoting Caiçara gastronomy also implies integrating it into broader sustainable tourism strategies that respect the environment and value local culture.

Key Word: Tradition; Sustainability; Ilha do Mel; Caiçara Gastronomy.

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I. Introduction

According to Diegues (2004), Caiçara communities emerged from the intermingling of Indigenous peoples, Portuguese colonizers, and enslaved Africans. These traditional communities have a way of life based on agriculture, fishing, plant gathering, crafts, and cooking. Caiçara cuisine, a key element of these communities' cultural identity, reflects centuries of adaptations and interactions with the environment. This tradition, inherited from ancestors, is updated and passed on to new generations through oral tradition (Diegues, 2004).

On the coastal islands of Paraná State, the food tradition not only preserves ancestral practices but also offers significant potential for sustainable economic development. Caiçara cuisine is characterized by the use of local ingredients, such as fish and seafood, and by preparation techniques passed down from generation to generation, reflecting the culture and identity of the Caiçara communities (Assis, 2023). These dishes, in addition to providing sustenance, carry with them life stories and traditions passed down through generations.

Over the years, the growing interest in authentic gastronomic experiences and community-based tourism has brought new opportunities for island communities, which seek to value and promote their cuisine as

a distinctive tourist attraction. Gastronomic tourism is a modality that allows travelers to explore local culture through gastronomy, involving experiences such as tasting typical dishes and participating in culinary events (Gimenes-Minasse, 2019). In this context, gastronomic tourism emerges as a viable strategy to boost the local economy while preserving the rich Caiçara cultural heritage. The potential benefits of tourism, whose main attraction is gastronomy, are numerous, including the recognition and affirmation of local culture through the appreciation of the region's typical dishes and products, the increase in traditional production, and the boost to the local economy, among many other factors (Martins; Silveira, 2020).

However, despite the great potential of Caiçara cuisine, it faces challenges related to the preservation and appreciation of its traditions. The modernization of economic activities and the cultural influence of other regions can threaten the survival of these unique cultural manifestations. During low season periods (winter), many establishments face a drop in demand, making it difficult to maintain economic sustainability. Furthermore, the logistics of obtaining fresh ingredients and the lack of institutional support and consistent public policies to encourage local gastronomic development exacerbate these problems (Silveira; Rejowski; Malerba, 2023).

Given this context, this study aimed to investigate Caiçara cuisine as a sustainable alternative for the development of the Paraná Coastal Islands. To this end, it was sought to identify the socioeconomic profile of individuals who offer this gastronomy as a source of income and highlight the main typical dishes that make up this tradition and how Caiçara gastronomy offers authentic experiences for tourists. Furthermore, the research analyzed the perceptions of those involved regarding the opportunities and sustainability of Caiçara cuisine in the development process of Ilha do Mel.

II. Bibliographic Review

Caiçara cuisine is a profound expression of the cultural identity of coastal communities in southern Brazil, reflecting a rich heritage of practices and dishes passed down from generation to generation. According to Hanazaki and Begossi (2006), Caiçara food preferences, such as the consumption of catfish and mullet fish, are closely linked to cultural taboos that not only preserve certain resources but also ensure ecological sustainability. The choice of specific fish, often influenced by local traditions and myths, reveals how Caiçara people manage natural resources in a way that balances exploitation and conservation. These dietary habits are not merely gastronomic choices, but are part of a complex system of ecological knowledge that ensures the continuity of communities and the preservation of coastal ecosystems (Hanazaki; Begossi 2006).

Food taboos among the Caiçara people, such as the preference for certain fish species over others, play a crucial role in maintaining local biodiversity. Hanazaki and Begossi (2006) argue that these practices help prevent overfishing of more vulnerable species, promoting the resilience of marine ecosystems. Furthermore, respect for natural cycles, such as the phases of the moon and the tides, reflects a deep understanding of natural rhythms, which is fundamental to the survival of Caiçara communities. Preserving this knowledge and dietary practices is essential not only for the continuity of Caiçara culture but also for the sustainability of Brazil's coastal regions.

Artisanal fishing is one of the pillars of sustainability in Caiçara communities, providing not only a staple food source but also shaping the cultural and social practices of these populations. Ramires and Barrella (2003) emphasize that these practices, which include the use of gillnets and the observance of closed seasons, are adapted to local environmental conditions. These fishing techniques are based on a deep knowledge of marine ecosystems and traditions, allowing resources to be exploited sustainably.

The relationship between human values and consumer behavior is a crucial factor in promoting Caiçara cuisine, especially in the context of gastronomic tourism. Mendes (2023) discusses how cultural values, such as an appreciation for authenticity and sustainability, influence the food choices of consumers and tourists that are seeking for authentic experiences. Many consumers who value sustainability and cultural preservation tend to prefer food that reflect these values, which can directly benefit Caiçara gastronomy. Mendes (2023) argue that purchasing behavior influenced by personal values not only promotes the preservation of culinary traditions but also reinforces the importance of environmental and social sustainability.

In this context, Caiçara cuisine can be positioned as a gastronomic option that not only offers flavor but also contributes to the preservation of culture and the environment. Furthermore, integrating human values into the promotion of Caiçara cuisine can be an effective strategy for attracting conscious tourists, who are willing to pay more for products that align with their ethical values. The emphasis on authenticity, sustainability, and connection with nature can differentiate Caiçara cuisine from other gastronomic offerings, making it a significant attraction in the tourism market. Mendes (2023) suggests that marketing campaigns that highlight these values can increase demand for Caiçara dishes, strengthening the local economy and promoting the sustainable development of communities.

The morality associated with the consumption of sustainable food is a growing factor in contemporary society, influencing consumer choices and shaping perceptions of Caiçara cuisine. Bispo and Arruda Filho

(2020) argue that morality and social status influence perceptions of sustainable practices, highlighting that the consumption of Caiçara food related to products/traditions can be seen as a way to support ethical and environmentally friendly practices. Consumers who associate morality with sustainability tend to value products that respect the environment and producing communities (Bispo; Arruda Filho 2020). In Caiçara cuisine, this association can be used to promote traditional dishes as ethical choices, attracting an audience that values social and environmental responsibility. Bispo and Arruda Filho (2020) suggest that promoting Caiçara cuisine as a morally correct option can increase its attractiveness, especially in markets where consumers are increasingly conscious. Furthermore, the perceived status associated with the consumption of sustainable food can contribute to the appreciation of Caiçara and traditional cuisine. Bispo and Arruda Filho (2020) argue that this combination of morality and status can be a determining factor in the promotion of Caiçara gastronomy, strengthening its market position and contributing to the preservation of the cultural and environmental traditions in these communities.

The cuisine, marked by simplicity and the use of fresh, local ingredients, is a living expression of the Caiçara way of life. Fish such as snook and mullet fish, crustaceans such as shrimp and crab, as well as typical fruits such as cambuci, plantain banana, and juçara palm heart, make up dishes that blend flavors of the sea and the forest, revealing the Caiçara's deep knowledge of nature's cycles and the seasonality of ingredients. Dishes such as 'moqueca caiçara', fish in banana leaves, and oyster farofa are not just recipes, they are knowledge passed down through generations, directly dependent on the health of coastal ecosystems (Anacleto et al. 2023). Therefore, keeping these ingredients available is not just a matter of taste, it is a matter of identity. The continuity of these culinary practices is deeply intertwined with the sustainability of artisanal fishing and environmental conservation. Therefore, Anacleto et al. (2023) argue that protecting Caiçara culture requires both effective environmental policies and recognition of the value of the traditional knowledge that shapes the daily lives of these communities.

More than just food, these dishes are living history, and when combined with gastronomic tourism, as Gimenes-Minasse (2019) argues, they can boost the local economy without sacrificing authenticity. Seafood festivals and tourist routes that celebrate this cuisine, can offer visitors not only a taste, but also an immersive cultural and environmental experience.

III. Material And Methods

This research adopted a mixed approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, aiming to understand how Caiçara cuisine is maintained and represented in the food services of Ilha do Mel. The decision to integrate these two approaches was made to capture both objective data about the establishments and the perceptions and interpretations of the managers themselves. Therefore, the study is exploratory and descriptive in nature, following the model outlined by Gil (2008), and was conducted in-person on the restaurants of Ilha do Mel between August 2024 and June 2025.

Data collection involved in-person visits to the restaurants and inns on Ilha do Mel. Initially, a preliminary mapping of establishments with potential cultural relevance was conducted using sources such as local guides, online review platforms, and recommendations from residents. After this screening, direct contact was established with those responsible, either in person, by phone, or through staff, to explain the study objectives and request their participation.

Semi-structured questionnaires were administered, consisting of closed-ended questions (to gather objective data) and open-ended questions (to explore opinions, practices, and interpretations). The questionnaires were administered in person, at the interviewees' workplace, at prearranged times to avoid interfering with the establishments' routine. It is important to note that, according to the Paranaguá City Hall (2025), Ilha do Mel has 30 establishments offering traditional caiçara cuisine, and all of which were interviewed in this study.

All 30 managers and/or owners interviewed work in the establishments recognized for serving typical Caiçara cuisine. The selection followed a purposive sampling approach (Minayo, 2011), considering two main criteria: 1. Location: only restaurants and inns located on Ilha do Mel were included; 2. Cultural relevance: priority was given to establishments with menus that highlight traditional Caiçara cuisine.

Quantitative data (related, for example, to the frequency with which certain dishes are offered or the origin of ingredients) were organized into spreadsheets and analyzed using simple descriptive statistics: frequencies, percentages, and direct comparisons.

Qualitative data (derived from open-ended questions) were processed through content analysis, following the guidelines of Bardin (2009). The process involved skimming, identifying units of meaning, thematic categorization, and interpreting emerging patterns in the interviewees' reports.

Procedure methodology

The questionnaire was divided into three sections: 1. Socioeconomic profile: Questions about age, gender, marital status, education, and economic situation; 2. Dishes and ingredients: Identification of typical dishes offered and the most commonly used ingredients; 3. Perceptions of limits and opportunities: Questions related to challenges faced, such as seasonality and infrastructure, and the interviewees' perceptions of the future of caiçara cuisine in regional development.

The qualitative data analysis involved categorizing open-ended responses, seeking to identify patterns and recurring themes. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and the results were compiled and presented in graphs and tables for easier understanding and then described in text form in the discussion of the results.

All participants were informed about the research objectives, and the participation was voluntary, with the signing of an Informed Consent Form. Anonymity was guaranteed, as was the exclusive use of the data for academic purposes. The research followed the guidelines of Resolution No. 510/2016 of the National Health Council, which addresses research ethics in the humanities and social sciences. The results and discussions are presented descriptively for better understanding, as the questions were both open-ended and closed-ended, and content analysis helped describe the discussion of the results.

IV. Results And Discussion

At Ilha do Mel, the residents' long-term residence demonstrates a strong sense of identity connected to the area. According to the data obtained, 56% of respondents have lived on the island for more than 19 years, reinforcing the notion of cultural continuity and community roots. This finding corroborates the findings of the Paraná Institute for Economic and Social Development (IPARDES, 2022), which highlights the high rate of population settlement in the island areas of the Paraná Coast. This prolonged residence contributes to the maintenance of traditional practices, such as Caiçara cuisine, which is passed down through generations through oral tradition and daily life, consolidating itself as a central element in the construction of local identity (Gimenes-Minasse, 2019).

However, the educational landscape at the island presents significant limitations. Approximately 50% of respondents have completed elementary school at most, reflecting the limited access to formal education, common in geographically isolated areas. Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2022 Census) corroborate this situation, indicating that coastal regions of Paraná have lower education rates than the state average. This low level of education can directly compromise the development of local economic activities, hindering professional development, access to public policies, the modernization of businesses, and the adoption of more structured administrative practices.

Regarding the economic situation of residents, the panorama reveals a context of fluctuation and adaptation. 41.7% of respondents reported that their economic situation is improving, while 16.7% stated they are facing difficulties, and the same percentage consider themselves comfortable. These data demonstrate a scenario marked by fragility, but also resilience, especially when considering that 58.3% of respondents rely on other sources of income besides caiçara cuisine, such as artisanal fishing, hospitality tourism, and service provision. This diversification of activities reveals an adaptive strategy in the face of local economic instability. According to the Ministry of Economy (2021), self-employed workers and service providers in tourist regions were particularly impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is still reflected in the economic recovery efforts observed in the communities of Ilha do Mel.

The lack of culinary and management courses reveals a significant gap in the provision of technical training tailored to local realities, as reported by respondents. The vast majority of participants stated they had never taken culinary courses, and the few who mentioned some experience in this area referred to specific initiatives, generally promoted by institutions like SEBRAE or isolated initiatives by the Paranaguá city government. These training courses, however, were described as disconnected from the community's daily life and lacking continuity. One interviewee commented that "what I learned was by watching my mother cooking. I never took a course, it was all day-to-day," highlighting that traditional knowledge remains the mainstay of training for local chefs and entrepreneurs.

Regarding business management, the situation is similar. Most interviewees reported never having participated in a management training, and that they run their businesses intuitively, based on practical experience and, in many cases, with the help of family members, especially younger ones, through the use of social media and basic marketing. The challenge of professionalization is clear, especially when considering the low level of education prevalent among those interviewed. This lack of systematic training directly compromises the organization and sustainability of businesses, keeping many of them informal. As Anacleto and Baptista-Metri (2023) point out, the lack of technical and institutional support contributes to the reproduction of cycles of economic dependence and limits the possibilities for autonomous development in traditional communities.

It is important to emphasize, however, that any training proposal aimed at Ilha do Mel must consider the community's cultural context. It is not just about offering pre-packaged courses, but also about developing training that engages with local knowledge, respects residents' backgrounds, and values traditional knowledge. As Diegues (2004) has already pointed out, valuing traditional cultures necessarily involves listening, coexistence, and the integration of popular knowledge into development strategies. What is at stake, therefore, is not just the lack of formal training, but the urgent need for public policies that recognize and strengthen local culture as a legitimate and strategic part of regional development.

The next question concerned the way in which the residents of Ilha do Mel obtain their ingredients, which follows a logic strongly linked to the local economy, seasonality, and geographic accessibility. According to the interviewees, seafood such as shrimp, clams, crabs, and various fish are purchased directly from the community's fishermen, ensuring a short production cycle that values artisanal fishing and boosts local income. The most common vegetables, such as onions, tomatoes, peppers, and potatoes, are generally purchased from small producers on the mainland or brought in by traders who periodically supply the island. Specific ingredients, such as palm oil or coconut milk, which are not produced locally, must be transported from the mainland, which incurs logistical costs and risks of shortages, especially during periods of low maritime transport frequency. This supply logic, based on the articulation between the territory and community relations, is directly linked to what Neto (2018) calls "territorialized traditional food systems," in which the ways of obtaining, preparing, and consuming the food reflect the ecosystems, local knowledge, and social networks of the community. At Ilha do Mel, this dynamic highlights how Caiçara cuisine is not just a gastronomic practice, but a direct reflection of the social, ecological, and economic organization of the territory.

The analysis of data about labor, positions, and family involvement in the island's gastronomic businesses reveals a structure strongly based on family and informal relationships. Most of the establishments interviewed have few permanent employees, and in many cases, these positions are filled by the owners themselves or close relatives. Family work appears to be one of the main sources of business sustainability, and it is common to find families working together, that is, parents, children, siblings, in-laws, etc. both in the kitchen and in customer service. In some situations, family members turn between different roles, demonstrating flexibility and a high degree of commitment to the business, especially during the summer season.

This organizational model is typical of small gastronomic enterprises in peripheral or isolated territories, where financial capital is limited and community ties are essential for maintaining the activity (Trentini, 2011). According to Trentini (2011), family labor is one of the pillars of traditional gastronomic businesses, not only for cost reasons, but also for the transmission of knowledge, mutual trust, and preservation of the cultural identity of the food prepared. At Ilha do Mel, this is clearly reflected, positions do not follow a formalized or rigid hierarchical division, but rather a dynamic based on coexistence and experience acquired within the family nucleus. The predominance of family labor also helps explain the informality of many processes, from hiring to inventory management and service. Even so, this type of organization guarantees entrepreneurs autonomy and strengthens community ties, serving as a factor of economic resilience in regions with little government presence or specific public policies. The active presence of the family, in this context, is not only an alternative to formal employment, but a strategy for survival, cultural continuity, and the transmission of caiçara gastronomic practices.

The way businesses at Ilha do Mel handle the promotion of their products and services reflects a very common reality in traditional, small-scale communities: advertising happens organically, almost always limited to word of mouth and occasional use of social media. The vast majority of respondents stated they do not invest in paid advertising or more elaborate marketing strategies. When they do have a digital presence, it is usually managed informally by a family member, without ongoing planning. This lack of structure does not indicate disinterest, but rather a lack of training and access to appropriate tools, especially given local logistical and economic constraints.

In this sense, when asked if they believe tourists seek out what is offered by the establishment, many responded positively. There is recognition that traditional dishes, such as 'Lambe-Lambe', 'Cambira', or fish with green banana, arouse curiosity and appeal to those seeking authentic experiences. However, some interviewees also expressed uncertainty, mentioning that some visitors seem to expect more "conventional" options or greater aesthetic sophistication. This perception reveals a point of tension: locals recognize the cultural value of what they produce, but they do not have the necessary tools to transform this tradition into a properly structured and valued tourism product. Thus, the lack of broader communication strategies compromises the potential of caiçara cuisine as a tourist attraction.

The concept of gastronomic tourism, which is gaining increasing relevance nationally, points precisely to the appreciation of cuisine culture as a central element of the tourist experience. According to Gimenes-Minasse (2019), this type of tourism not only strengthens the local economy but also affirms traditional identities and knowledge, extending visitor stays and promoting territorial differentiation. In the case of Ilha do Mel, gastronomy is not merely a complementary resource, it can and should play a prominent role in the region's

tourism strategy. To this end, it is essential that residents receive technical and institutional support, so they can organize their production, improve marketing, and strategically position their knowledge in the market, without sacrificing their distinctive authenticity.

When analyzing the responses related to the main challenges faced by entrepreneurs at Ilha do Mel and what they consider positive aspects of their activities, it becomes clear that there is a delicate balance between structural limitations and the appreciation of cultural and emotional ties to the region. Among the most frequently cited challenges are the seasonality of tourism, the lack of infrastructure, especially regarding food storage, and the instability of electricity supplies and most notably, the absence of effective public policies aimed at training and encouraging local gastronomic activity. These obstacles frequently hinder long-term planning, making businesses vulnerable during low season periods (winter) and requiring constant adaptation efforts on the part of residents.

But in contrast to all this, the interviewees highlighted three aspects they consider the main positives ones of their work: the transmission of family recipes and knowledge; the possibility of securing a source of income without leaving the island; and the direct connection with local, fresh, and quality ingredients. These elements reveal that, despite the difficulties, there is a strong sense of belonging, pride, and cultural continuity among the residents. Many reported that they learned to cook by observing their parents and grandparents, and that the simple act of preparing and serving a traditional dish represents more than a work, it is a way of keeping the community's collective memory alive.

The contrast between the problems faced and the positive aspects highlighted allows us to observe a significant parallel: the same elements that hinder the management and growth of businesses, such as isolation, informality, and lack of support, are also, paradoxically, those that preserve the originality, authenticity, and autonomy of caiçara culture. The lack of large structures, for example, forces residents to work with fresh, seasonal, and local ingredients; the absence of formal courses is compensated for by emotional and practical learning within the family environment; and the scarcity of institutional resources strengthens networks of solidarity and exchange within the community. This is precisely where the key to more effective public policies lies: it is not about replacing what already exists, but about strengthening what is already done, while respecting identity and local organizational forms. As Trentini (2011) points out, in family-based gastronomic businesses, tradition and shared work are not obstacles to professionalization, but rather central elements that need to be recognized as part of the solution.

The use of ingredients produced in the community reveals a recurring practice of valuing local products, whether out of tradition or necessity. Most report purchasing fish and seafood directly from island fishermen, as well as vegetables, spices, and other items from small producers or local markets. This dynamic creates an informal economic network, where resources circulate among residents, strengthening community ties and fostering a more deeply rooted economy. At the same time, it highlights the potential of cooperatives, still largely unexplored in the region, as an alternative for organizing and expanding this logic of production and distribution among residents. A cooperative system could ensure greater regularity in the supply of inputs, better negotiation conditions, and even mutual support between producers and local merchants.

However, when it was talk about the support from public authorities, the answers have changed. Most interviewees stated they receive no direct support, whether financial, technical, or logistical. Many mentioned that existing initiatives are ad hoc, discontinued, or fail to consider the specificities of the islands' realities. This lack of institutional support contrasts with the residents' independent efforts to keep traditional cuisine and small businesses alive, even under often adverse conditions. The lack of integrated public policies reinforces isolation and limits the growth potential of initiatives that already demonstrate cultural, social, and economic value.

It is in this context that the relevance of a community-based tourism approach stands out, understanding the territory not only as a destination but also as a living expression of knowledge, practices, and ways of life. According to Gimenes-Minasse (2019), this type of tourism allows communities to be protagonists in the process, valuing their traditions and generating income in a fairer and more sustainable manner. When aligned with cooperative practices and the strengthening of local production chains, this approach helps reduce dependence on external intermediaries and increase the autonomy of traditional communities. At Ilha do Mel, where food is prepared with what is caught, grown, or exchanged, institutional recognition and collaboration among residents could transform the current reality, marked by informality and solitary resistance, into a collective project of cultural appreciation and sustainable development.

The interviewees' perception of the importance of caiçara cuisine is quite clear: for most, it is not just an economic activity, but rather an essential component of local culture, carrying memories, identities, and ways of life that span generations. Many stated that traditional dishes represent their family histories and that cooking is a way to preserve these roots. This recognition of cuisine as heritage goes beyond food, it involves practices, knowledge, relationships, and feelings. In contexts like Ilha do Mel, this cultural dimension can and should be seen as a gateway to more meaningful tourist experiences, especially those focused on gastronomic tourism and community-based tourism.

Despite this potential, when it comes to culinary-related events, few interviewees reported having participated in organized initiatives with this focus. Existing events are generally informal or promoted by one-off initiatives, often without continuity or institutional support. This absence reveals an opportunity that has not yet been strategically explored. Holding gastronomic festivals, local fairs, or themed itineraries could not only strengthen the economy of small businesses, but also position Ilha do Mel as a unique destination in the event tourism scene, adding value to local culture.

Coordinating cuisine with tourism in a planned manner means paving the way for residents to become protagonists of tourist reception, valuing their knowledge and generating sustainable income. As Gimenes-Minasse (2019) points out, gastronomic tourism, especially when located in traditional territories, has the power to transform meals into cultural experiences, connecting visitors with local ways of life. At the same time, community-based tourism reinforces local protagonism, fostering a more equitable relationship between those who receive and those who visit. In practice, this requires integrated actions: training, minimal infrastructure, institutional support, and, above all, active listening to the community (Gimenes-Minasse, 2019). Caíçara cuisine, in this context, ceases to be merely a product to be consumed and becomes a way of telling stories, welcoming with affection, and affirming the territory's identity.

The intimate connection between cuisine and the life stories of the residents of Ilha do Mel is remarkable, as many reported that continuing to cook the region's traditional dishes is not just a professional choice, but a way to keep their family traditions alive and affirm the identity of the place where they live. Their histories reveal the pride of those who learned from their parents and grandparents, and who now see the kitchen as a space of memory, belonging, and resistance. This sense of continuity and connection to the territory is directly related to how these communities perceive local development. It is not just about generating income, but doing so based on practices that respect and value what is unique to the region. As Milton Santos (1996) argues, territory is a space charged with meaning, built by the relationships between people and the place where they live. In this sense, caíçara cuisine represents much more than an economic activity, it is a way of existing, of telling stories, and of collective affirmation (Gimenes-Minasse, 2019). When offered to tourists, it also becomes a channel of communication between different worlds, those who cook and those who visit, those who live there every day and those who pass through briefly.

From this, it is possible to understand the importance of thinking of tourism not only as a market, but as a field of relationships. When structured respectfully and participatively, tourism can strengthen local networks, generate autonomy, and preserve cultural practices, as studies on community-based tourism point out (Coriolano, 2003). Gastronomy, in this context, becomes a concrete tool for the sustainable development of Ilha do Mel, as it combines tradition, sensory experience, and income generation. As Gimenes-Minasse (2019) states, gastronomic tourism has the potential to transform meals into complete cultural experiences, and this is undoubtedly already happening on this island, albeit in a non-systematic manner.

What is lacking, therefore, is not appreciation for what is already being done, but recognition, support, and structure so that these practices can continue to exist with dignity and prominence.

V. Conclusion

Based on the understanding of caíçara culture and cuisine, it can be seen that, for those interviewed, caíçara cuisine is deeply intertwined with local culture. They see the dishes not simply as food, but as representations of their communities' history, traditions, and sustainable practices. For many, preparing a typical dish is a cultural act, carrying memories, habits, and ways of life that have been passed down from generation to generation. Furthermore, they consider their cuisine the reflection of the island way of life, where the relationship with the sea and the land is fundamental.

The use of ingredients such as fresh fish, shellfish, and plantains is an example of how caíçara food and culture is shaped by the natural environment. These factors demonstrate that caíçara cuisine is much more than a means of subsistence, it is a cultural link that connects past generations to present and reinforces the sense of identity of local communities.

Based on the results of the field research, it is clear that caíçara cuisine has the potential to become a driver of sustainable development at Ilha do Mel. If challenges related to seasonality and logistics are mitigated, local development is likely to further increase. Typical dishes, such as 'Lambe Lambe' and 'Cambira', are more than just combinations of ingredients, they carry with them narratives from past generations, ways of life, and a deep respect for nature. This culinary heritage reflects how local communities have adapted to the islands' environmental conditions, using natural resources sustainably and preserving practices that have been passed down through time.

However, despite its cultural importance and its potential to drive regional development, caíçara cuisine faces challenges that threaten its continuity and sustainability. Although there are specific initiatives to promote culture and tourism on the islands, these actions are often sporadic and lack a long-term strategy. The lack of

consistent public policies aimed at preserving and promoting local cuisine means residents are largely dependent on their own efforts, without the necessary support to address the structural challenges the region presents.

The opportunities to transform caíçara cuisine into a driver of sustainable development are promising. Promoting caíçara cuisine also implies integrating it into broader sustainable tourism strategies that respect the environment and value local culture. Creating gastronomic itineraries, festivals, and events that celebrate caíçara cuisine are examples of how this tradition can be promoted and, at the same time, generate economic benefits for the island. By embracing its cultural roots while adapting to contemporary demands, this practice has the potential to become an example of how tradition and innovation can work together with sustainable and inclusive development. The success of this journey will depend on concrete and collaborative actions that value and respect the rich cultural heritage of these places, ensuring that future generations can continue to enjoy and benefit from this unique cuisine, deeply rooted in local history and culture.

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