

THE ROLE OF DIASPORA RESTAURANTS IN INDONESIA'S GASTRODIPLOMACY: A CASE STUDY OF WAJAN IN OREGON, UNITED STATES

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Abstract

Gastrodiplomacy has developed as part of public diplomacy by utilizing cuisine as a medium for engaging foreign publics. Indonesia implements this approach through the Indonesia Spice Up The World (ISUTW) policy, which promotes Indonesian cuisine and encourages the expansion of Indonesian restaurants abroad. This article aims to analyze the role of the diaspora restaurant Wajan in Portland, Oregon, as a non-state actor in Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy and its linkage to the ISUTW policy. This study employs a qualitative approach using secondary data based on document analysis, including academic literature, policy publications, media reports, and documentation from Indonesian overseas representations. The data are analyzed through descriptive qualitative methods to identify patterns of roles, forms of gastrodiplomatic practices, and their implications for Indonesia's image. The findings indicate that Wajan contributes to introducing Indonesian cuisine to local audiences through gastronomic experiences, cultural interactions, and participation in activities affiliated with Indonesian diplomatic missions. These practices reflect the role of diaspora restaurants in supporting culinary-based public diplomacy and enhancing Indonesia's cultural appeal. The study concludes that diaspora restaurants can be understood as part of Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy ecosystem, where state policies and non-state actors interact at the local level.

Keywords: gastrodiplomacy; diaspora restaurant; Wajan; Indonesia Spice Up The World; public diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

Gastrodiplomacy is understood as an important instrument in modern public diplomacy, where cuisine is utilized as a medium to build national image, expand cultural appeal, and strengthen international relations (Rockower, 2012). In the context of Indonesia, a country rich in spice-based cuisine and cultural diversity, food serves as a strategic soft power asset that is highly relevant for global promotion. To implement gastrodiplomacy initiatives, the Indonesian government launched the *Indonesia Spice Up the World* (ISUTW) program in 2021 as part of its broader foreign policy and national economic development strategy. ISUTW was designed to globally introduce and promote Indonesia's rich spices and culinary diversity through diplomatic strategies targeting international markets, increasing exports of food and spice products, and expanding the number of Indonesian restaurants abroad (Ulung, 2025). This program positions Indonesia's spice heritage and culinary history as its main value proposition in expanding the global reach of its culture and culinary industry, thereby contributing to shaping international public perception of the country.

The primary objectives of ISUTW encompass several interconnected strategic aspects. First, the program aims to significantly increase the export value of Indonesian spices and seasonings to reach USD 2 billion in the global market, while strengthening Indonesia's food products as leading commodities. Second, the government targets the growth of Indonesian restaurants abroad, aiming to establish 4,000 outlets in various countries as part of gastrodiploacy through restaurants that introduce Indonesian culinary culture to foreign audiences (Indonesia Spice Up the World, 2025). Third, ISUTW seeks to enhance the competitiveness and brand value of Indonesian cuisine through media promotion, food festivals, and collaboration between government institutions and the private sector, thereby generating positive impacts on tourism, trade, and investment. Febriandhany et al. (2025) emphasize that this program is designed as a cross-ministerial initiative that is not only oriented toward cultural promotion but also toward economic opportunities and the strengthening of bilateral relations. By integrating cultural diplomacy, economic diplomacy, and nation branding, ISUTW serves as an instrument aligned with the concept of soft power, as it seeks to build attraction and goodwill from other countries through culinary appeal without coercive means.

Despite its significant potential, the implementation of ISUTW faces several structural and operational challenges. A study by Febriandhany et al. (2025) identifies key obstacles, including complex bureaucracy, weak inter-agency coordination, and intense global competition in the culinary and spice industries. Additionally, limited diaspora engagement and the lack of a strong, globally recognizable Indonesian culinary identity hinder the effectiveness of promotional efforts. These challenges indicate that the success of gastrodiploacy depends not only on cultural richness but also on policy consistency and synergy among involved stakeholders.

On the other hand, ISUTW continues to hold substantial strategic potential as an instrument of Indonesia's soft power. Through activities such as Indonesia Spice Week, culinary festivals, and cooking demonstrations abroad, the program has been able to raise international public awareness of Indonesia's rich spices and distinctive flavors (Febriandhany et al., 2025). These activities not only expand the exposure of Indonesian cuisine but also strengthen nation branding by portraying Indonesia as a country with a rich cultural heritage that aligns with global trends. Thus, ISUTW demonstrates a strong correlation between gastrodiploacy and soft power, where cuisine becomes a means of building a positive image and fostering long-term relationships with international communities.

In addition to the ISUTW program, Indonesia's gastrodiploacy efforts are also reflected in the management of the Gastrodiploacy Dashboard by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, which maps the presence of Indonesian diaspora restaurants worldwide. Data compiled by the Ministry indicates that diaspora restaurants are considered strategic non-state actors in public diplomacy, as they directly introduce Indonesian cuisine to local communities. This digital platform presents visualized data on Indonesian restaurants and spice-based products across the globe, based on surveys conducted in collaboration with Indonesian overseas missions between March and May 2024, identifying 1,221 Indonesian restaurants operating abroad (Jakarta Globe, 2024). The government views this platform not merely as a statistical tool but as a reference for culinary actors and Indonesian representatives abroad in formulating more effective and measurable gastrodiploacy strategies, including supporting the ISUTW program launched in 2021. The visibility of such data is expected to enhance coordination among stakeholders, ensuring that the promotion of Indonesian cuisine becomes more integrated and impactful.

The launch of this dashboard was also accompanied by the assertion that Indonesian cuisine is an effective medium for strengthening cultural, economic, and trade relations among countries. During the launch event, the Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that culinary arts have "great potential to enhance economic growth, trade, and international relations" as they function as a

cultural bridge appealing to global audiences (Jakarta Globe, 2024). This statement aligns with the view that gastrodiploamacy is not merely about promoting food but constitutes part of a broader soft power strategy that integrates cultural identity with economic interests and public diplomacy. Support also comes from the Ministry of Creative Economy, which considers the dashboard instrumental in accelerating global recognition of Indonesian gastronomy (Jakarta Globe, 2024). Therefore, the Gastrodiploamacy Dashboard serves not only as a monitoring tool but also as a policy instrument that bridges empirical data with the formulation of national culinary promotion strategies abroad. In line with the findings of Febriandhany et al. (2025), Indonesian restaurants overseas function not only as business entities but also as spaces of cultural interaction that strengthen Indonesia's image and support nation branding efforts.

Accordingly, this article aims to analyze the role of the diaspora restaurant *Wajan* in Portland, Oregon, United States, as part of Indonesia's gastrodiploamacy efforts, by examining its connection with the ISUTW policy and its contribution to strengthening Indonesia's soft power and nation branding. Through data-driven mapping, the government can design more targeted gastrodiploamacy policies, strengthen diaspora networks, and ensure that the promotion of Indonesian cuisine is sustainable and aligned with national soft power strategies.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a focus on a case study of *Wajan* restaurant in Portland, Oregon. The data used in this research consist of secondary data obtained through document analysis, including academic literature, official policy publications, media reports, and documentation from Indonesian representatives abroad.

All data were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive method to identify patterns in the role of diaspora restaurants, the forms of gastrodiploamacy practices implemented, and their implications for Indonesia's image among international publics. The analysis connects non-state activities at the local level with the government's strategic policies, particularly the *Indonesia Spice Up the World* (ISUTW) program and the use of the Gastrodiploamacy Dashboard by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of ISUTW Through Diaspora Restaurants

Gastrodiploamacy is understood as an important instrument in modern public diplomacy, where cuisine is utilized as a medium to build national image, expand cultural appeal, and strengthen international relations (Rockower, 2012). In the context of Indonesia, a country rich in spice-based cuisine and cultural diversity, food serves as a strategic soft power asset that is highly relevant for global promotion. To implement gastrodiploamacy initiatives, the Indonesian government launched the *Indonesia Spice Up the World* (ISUTW) program in 2021 as part of its broader foreign policy and national economic development strategy. ISUTW was designed to globally introduce and promote Indonesia's rich spices and culinary diversity through diplomatic strategies targeting international markets, increasing exports of food and spice products, and expanding the number of Indonesian restaurants abroad (Ulung, 2025). This program positions Indonesia's spice heritage and culinary history as its main value proposition in expanding the global reach of its culture and culinary industry, thereby contributing to shaping international public perception of the country.

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The Role of Wajan as a Gastrodiplomacy Actor

The presence of Wajan restaurant in Portland, Oregon, illustrates how Indonesian cuisine is introduced to foreign publics through everyday, non-formal yet sustained interactions. By serving traditional Indonesian dishes such as *rendang*, *gado-gado*, *nasi campur*, and spiced fried chicken, Wajan provides a gastronomic experience that represents the diversity and richness of Indonesian culture to the local community in the United States (Jackson-Glidden, 2019). This approach allows foreign audiences to engage with Indonesia not through formal political or diplomatic narratives, but through sensory, personal, and emotional experiences. Such practices reflect the nature of gastrodiplomacy as a form of cross-cultural communication that reaches broader audiences through food as a medium (Rockower, 2012).

In this context, Wajan can be positioned as a non-state actor that actively contributes to Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy. Diaspora restaurants like Wajan operate independently as business entities, yet indirectly perform public diplomacy functions by representing Indonesian culinary culture within foreign social spaces. This aligns with Pham's (2013) perspective that gastrodiplomacy is not solely conducted by the state, but also involves non-state actors who contribute to shaping national image and attractiveness. By presenting Indonesian cultural narratives through its menu, interior design, and storytelling behind each dish, Wajan performs a form of cultural diplomacy integrated within public diplomacy.

The gastrodiplomacy practices carried out by Wajan occur within its daily operations, including interactions between staff and customers, explanations of the origins of dishes, and the presentation of food that preserves Indonesian spices and cooking techniques. These activities reflect what Rockower describes as a subtle and repetitive form of gastrodiplomacy that operates through dining experiences rather than explicit political campaigns (Rockower, 2012). Thus, Wajan functions as a cultural meeting space that facilitates informal dialogue between Indonesia and the local American public on a micro yet continuous scale. The positive reception of Wajan by the local community further demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach as a source of soft power. The restaurant has received favorable responses from the Portland community, as well as coverage from local and international media, which recognize Wajan as an authentic representation of Indonesian cuisine in the region (Jackson-Glidden, 2019). According to Nye, soft power operates through attraction rather than coercion, meaning that enjoyable cultural experiences can shape positive perceptions of a country (Nye, 2004). In this regard, Wajan contributes to shaping Indonesia's image as a country with rich, welcoming, and appealing culinary traditions.

Media recognition and Wajan's reputation in Portland further reinforce its role in gastrodiplomacy. Coverage by *Eater Portland* and recognition from international travel media indicate that the restaurant is not only embraced by the Indonesian diaspora but also appreciated

by the wider public as part of Portland's culinary landscape (Jackson-Glidden, 2019). This phenomenon aligns with Pham's (2013) argument that the success of gastrodiploamacy can be measured through the increased visibility and acceptance of national cuisine abroad. Such recognition organically expands the reach of Indonesian cultural promotion through media exposure and consumer experience.

Beyond functioning as an instrument of soft power, Wajan also contributes to Indonesia's nation branding. Through its visual representation, culinary narratives, and consistent Indonesian identity, Wajan helps build positive associations with Indonesia as a country with a rich and valuable cultural heritage. Gudjonsson emphasizes that nation branding is not only shaped through official state campaigns but also through real experiences encountered by foreign publics in their daily interactions with a country's cultural products (Gudjonsson, 2005). In this sense, Wajan serves as an experiential medium that strengthens Indonesia's cultural brand, complementing state-led initiatives such as *Indonesia Spice Up the World*.

Overall, the practices carried out by Wajan demonstrate that diaspora restaurants can play a significant role in Indonesia's gastrodiploamacy by connecting cultural, economic, and public diplomacy dimensions. Through sustained culinary interactions, Wajan not only introduces Indonesian food but also builds attraction, positive image, and awareness of Indonesia's national identity at the local level. These findings reinforce the argument that gastrodiploamacy does not rely solely on state policies but also on the contributions of non-state actors operating within international public spaces (Rockower, 2012).

Conclusion and Suggestion

Based on the analysis, this study demonstrates that Indonesia's gastrodiploamacy can be effectively carried out through the involvement of non-state actors, particularly diaspora restaurants, as reflected in the case of Wajan restaurant in Portland, Oregon. The findings indicate that Wajan plays a role in introducing Indonesian cuisine to the local public through the presentation of traditional dishes and accompanying cultural narratives. This practice aligns with the understanding of gastrodiploamacy as part of public diplomacy that focuses on engaging foreign publics through cultural and culinary mediums, as proposed by Rockower and Pham.

The results also show that Wajan's activities contribute to the development of Indonesia's cultural attractiveness. Public reception and media attention toward Wajan indicate a growing interest in Indonesian cuisine presented by the restaurant. This finding supports Nye's concept of soft power, which emphasizes the role of cultural attraction in shaping foreign public perceptions without coercive instruments. Therefore, Wajan's practices can be understood as a form of non-state contribution in supporting Indonesia's public diplomacy through a culinary approach.

Furthermore, Wajan contributes to representing Indonesia's image abroad through the gastronomic experiences it offers to consumers. The presentation of cuisine, the restaurant's visual identity, and narratives about the origins of Indonesian dishes play a role in introducing aspects of Indonesian culture to foreign audiences. This finding aligns with Gudjonsson's view that nation branding can be shaped through real experiences encountered by foreign publics in their daily interactions with a country's cultural products. Thus, this study highlights that diaspora restaurants should be considered an integral part of Indonesia's gastrodiploamacy ecosystem, involving synergy between state policies and non-state actor practices.

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