



La Chola de Guano: Patrimonio Panadero, Identidad Cultural y la Viabilidad de su Certificación como Especialidad Tradicional Garantizada (ETG)

The Chola de Guano: Bakery Heritage, Cultural Identity, and the Feasibility of its Certification as a Traditional Specialty Guaranteed (TSG)

A Chola de Guano: Herança da Panificação, Identidade Cultural e a Viabilidade da sua Certificação como Especialidade Tradicional Garantida (ETG)

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Resumen

La chola de guano es un pan tradicional de Chimborazo, Ecuador, cuya producción artesanal y valor cultural la convierten en un símbolo de la identidad local. Este artículo examina sus orígenes históricos, métodos de producción, importancia cultural y socioeconómica, y la viabilidad de obtener la certificación como Especialidad Tradicional Garantizada (ETG). A partir de un enfoque documental y cualitativo, los hallazgos revelan que la chola combina técnicas transmitidas de generación en generación con adaptaciones contemporáneas, preservando así su autenticidad. Los resultados destacan su papel como motor del turismo y la economía local, a la vez que identifican tanto retos como oportunidades para lograr la certificación ETG. Se concluye que el producto cumple con los criterios fundamentales de originalidad, reputación y tradición documentada, si bien su implementación exige cohesión organizativa, apoyo institucional y estrategias que equilibren la preservación del patrimonio con la sostenibilidad económica.

Palabras Clave: Chola de Guano; panadería tradicional; patrimonio cultural; turismo gastronómico. Especialidad tradicional garantizada.

Abstract

The Chola de Guano is a traditional bread from Chimborazo, Ecuador, whose artisanal production and cultural value make it a symbol of local identity. This article examines its historical origins, production methods, cultural and socioeconomic importance, and the feasibility of obtaining certification as a Traditional Specialty Guaranteed (TSG). Based on a documentary and qualitative approach, the findings reveal that the Chola combines generationally transmitted techniques with contemporary adaptations, preserving its authenticity. Results highlight its role as a driver of tourism and the local economy, while also identifying both challenges and opportunities for achieving TSG certification. It is concluded that the product meets the fundamental criteria of originality, reputation, and documented tradition, although implementation demands organizational cohesion, institutional support, and strategies that balance heritage preservation with economic sustainability.

Keywords: Chola de Guano; traditional bakery; cultural heritage; food tourism Traditional Specialty Guaranteed.

Resumo

A Chola de Guano é um pão tradicional de Chimborazo, no Equador, cuja produção artesanal e valor cultural a tornam um símbolo da identidade local. Este artigo examina as suas origens históricas, métodos de produção, importância cultural e socioeconómica e a viabilidade de obter a certificação como Especialidade Tradicional Garantida (ETG). Com base numa abordagem documental e qualitativa, os resultados revelam que a Chola combina técnicas transmitidas de geração em geração com adaptações contemporâneas, preservando a sua autenticidade. Os resultados destacam o seu papel como motor do turismo e da economia local, ao mesmo tempo que identificam desafios e oportunidades para a obtenção da certificação ETG. Conclui-se que o produto cumpre os critérios fundamentais de originalidade, reputação e tradição documentada, embora a implementação exija coesão organizacional, apoio institucional e estratégias que equilibrem a preservação do património com a sustentabilidade económica.

Palavras-chave: Chola de Guano; padaria tradicional; património cultural; turismo gastronómico. Especialidade Tradicional Garantida.

Introduction

In Ecuador, artisanal bread making is a deeply rooted cultural practice in both Andean and urban communities. The processes involved have transcended their strictly alimentary function to become expressions of identity. Various authors agree that traditional breads act as repositories of collective memory and symbols of social cohesion (Erazo & Cobo, 2021; González, 2019). In this context, the Chola de Guano is a notable aspect of Ecuador's gastronomic heritage, combining inherited techniques and community values with tourist appeal to strengthen the local economy.

The Guano canton has designated this product as a key component of its regional identity, marketing it under the title "Magical Town". In addition to rugs, leather goods and fritada, Chola has become a central attraction for domestic and international tourists, who associate their visit to the province of Chimborazo with the purchase of this characteristic sweet bread (Pilco, 2023; Velástegui, 2017). This has enabled the Chola to be incorporated into narratives of cultural and tourist promotion, where gastronomy serves as a conduit between tradition and the market (Sthapit, 2019; Bessiere, 1998).

As time has passed, a tension has emerged within the production process between the preservation of traditional methods and the incorporation of technological innovations. Recent studies have

indicated a gradual introduction of mixers, electric ovens and controlled fermentation chambers in a number of bakeries. However, these innovations have not yet fully replaced manual kneading, prolonged fermentation and wood-fired baking, which remain integral to the quality and authenticity of the final product (Bermeo & Toapanta, 2021; González, 2019). This duality exemplifies a process of adaptation to market demands without compromising the essence of heritage.

Despite its cultural and economic importance, Chola de Guano has yet to receive official recognition as a Traditional Specialty Guaranteed (TSG), exposing it to risks of imitation and loss of authenticity. According to European regulations, this certification endorses the originality, documented tradition, and reputation of agri-food products made using distinctive methods (European Union, 2012). As posited by Aybek and Alphan (2021), in globalised contexts, the absence of heritage protection mechanisms engenders vulnerabilities that impinge upon the sustainability of local practices.

The present paper analyses the historical, technical and cultural elements that support the candidacy of Chola de Guano for the ETG. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to the discussion on the protection of Ecuador's gastronomic heritage and, concomitantly, to offer an argumentative framework that will strengthen its safeguarding, consolidating the projection of this bread as an engine of sustainable tourism development and as an emblem of cultural identity (OMT, 2022; Moreno et al., 2024).

Methodology

This study is based on a documentary and qualitative approach, drawing on academic and technical sources related to the production, history, and cultural significance of the Chola de Guano. This methodological choice allows for the integration of contributions from previous research on artisanal breadmaking, gastronomic heritage, and cultural tourism in Ecuador, with an emphasis on the processes that explain the enduring relevance and unique characteristics of this product (Pilco, 2023; Erazo & Cobo, 2021).

The methodological procedure was organized as an analytical content review, in which data related to the historical origins, production techniques, sociocultural role, and economic contributions of the Chola de Guano were systematized and compared. In this way, thematic categories were established to guide the results: origins and historical evolution, traditional production method,

cultural and socioeconomic importance, and potential for certification as a Guaranteed Traditional Speciality (GTS) (Bermeo & Toapanta, 2021; González, 2019).

The research recognizes that one of its main limitations lies not in the absence of testimonies from key actors—who appear in the reviewed documents—but in the scarcity of systematized academic information on the Chola de Guano. Although there are approaches that collect local experiences and accounts from producers, the number of scientific studies focused on this product is still small. This situation forces researchers to work with a limited bibliographic corpus, which reinforces the need to generate studies like the present one that consolidate and deepen the available knowledge base (Pilco, 2023; Moreira, 2024). The interpretation of the findings was carried out under an interpretive-critical approach, aimed at linking the available information with the international regulatory framework of the ETG and with academic debates on authenticity and gastronomic heritage. This method makes it possible not only to describe the characteristics of the Chola de Guano, but also to identify the opportunities and risks of its certification in a broader tourism and cultural context (Aybek & Alphan, 2021; UNWTO, 2022).

Results and Discussion

Characterization of the “Chola de Guano” product

The Chola de Guano is recognized as a medium-sized, round bread made with a salt dough enriched with lard or butter, according to each baker's family tradition. Its crust is thin and slightly crispy, with a uniform golden hue, while the crumb maintains an airy and soft texture. The filling, with a sweet and honeyed flavor, is primarily prepared with panela (unrefined cane sugar), although variations with pumpkin or guava have been documented, which gives it a unique character compared to other Ecuadorian bread specialties (Pilco, 2023; Erazo & Cobo, 2021).

The production process retains a strong artisanal character. Hand-kneading in a trough is a central practice that requires experience and tactile sensitivity, related to the texture and volume of the bread (Gálvez & Carrión, 2021). This is complemented by prolonged fermentation, which can last between eight and twelve hours, favoring the development of aromas and a uniform crumb structure (Quinllín, 2014). Finally, baking in wood-fired ovens, preferably eucalyptus, provides a smoky aroma and a characteristic crust that reinforce the product's identity (Zavala, 2025).

These characteristics not only distinguish the Chola on a sensory level, but also justify its recognition as a heritage product. Its presence in local bakeries, passed down from generation to

generation, gives it a cultural value that transcends the strictly nutritional, positioning it as a representative element of guanenian identity (Velástegui, 2017).

Origins and Historical Evolution

Records of the Chola de Guano bread place its origin in the early decades of the 20th century, when artisanal breadmaking was becoming established as a trade in the canton. Initially, it was made with a filling of sweet squash cooked with unrefined cane sugar and spices, a practice linked to the use of local and low-cost agricultural products (García, 2014). Over time, unrefined cane sugar became the predominant ingredient due to its greater market stability and accessibility, which ensured the continuity of production and reinforced its social acceptance (Pilco, 2023).

The baking method also reflects a process of historical adaptation. Initially, the dough was baked in embers, a technique that involved baking over hot coals and ashes (Bonilla & Zhumi, 2022). Later, wood-fired ovens were incorporated, giving the bread its crisp texture and characteristic aroma, and more recently, electric and gas ovens have been added, facilitating production without completely displacing traditional practices.

During the second half of the 20th century, the Chola began to gain prominence in local and regional life. Its consumption expanded beyond Guano, reaching Riobamba and other nearby cities, which solidified its image as a symbol of local identity. Emblematic families of the canton, such as the Jaramillo and Guamán families, kept the tradition alive and reinforced its value as a symbol of collective memory (González et al., 2023). Thus, the historical evolution of the Chola reveals a constant interaction between tradition and innovation, where changes in ingredients and techniques did not affect its authenticity but rather ensured its enduring presence.

Traditional Method of Making Chola de Guano

The artisanal production of Chola de Guano preserves practices that, despite incorporating some technical improvements, maintain the core of the original process. Hand kneading in a trough is an essential step, as it allows for the homogeneous integration of the ingredients and the adjustment of the dough's hydration through the baker's skill. This wooden utensil, in addition to facilitating uniform kneading, acts as a natural thermal insulator, preventing overheating that could disrupt fermentation (García A., 2014; Gálvez & Carrión, 2021).

Prolonged fermentation is another element that defines the quality of Chola bread. In traditional breadmaking, the fermentation time can extend up to twelve hours, favoring the development of complex aromas and a soft, airy crumb. This slow process allows the yeasts to act gradually, improving moisture retention and prolonging the product's freshness (Quinllín, 2014).

Wood-fired baking is the final and decisive stage. This method imparts a unique sensory profile, difficult to replicate in electric or gas ovens. The choice of wood, primarily eucalyptus, directly influences the flavor, contributing characteristic smoky notes. Furthermore, the thermal properties of the wood-fired oven ensure even baking, resulting in a crisp crust and a soft, airy crumb (Zavala, 2025; González et al., 2023).

The utensils used in the process, kneading troughs, wooden peels, and clay or metal containers, serve more than just an operational function. They also form part of the material heritage associated with the baking trade, constituting a tangible link between technique, collective memory, and cultural continuity in Guano (León, 2024).

Cultural and Socioeconomic Importance of the Chola de Guano

The Chola de Guano has become a symbol of identity that transcends its role as a food item, becoming a cultural and economic marker of the community. Its preparation combines techniques inherited from past generations with contemporary adaptations, preserving a know-how that the community recognizes as part of its intangible heritage (González et al., 2023). In this sense, the persistence of traditional recipes, the use of local ingredients, and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge have been crucial in maintaining its authenticity (Cedeño et al., 2024). On a cultural level, the Chola is not just a bread filled with panela (unrefined cane sugar), but an object laden with meaning that evokes hospitality and a sense of belonging. It is present at family celebrations, religious festivals, and community events, reinforcing its role as an element of social cohesion. As noted by the INPC and the Ministry of Culture and Heritage of Ecuador (2022), its declaration as Intangible Cultural Heritage recognized precisely its role in the construction of collective identity and its capacity to articulate memory and territory.

From a socioeconomic perspective, the Chola de Guano has become a driving force for tourism and commerce. The influx of national and international visitors to Chimborazo, especially Riobamba and Guano, recognizes it as a must-buy, along with other iconic products such as rugs and fritada (Moreira, 2024). Its sale generates direct income for bakeries and producing families,

in addition to boosting related activities such as transportation, the trade of supplies, and the complementary gastronomic offerings. In this sense, its inclusion in the “Guano Pueblo Mágico” program strengthens the connection between tradition and sustainable tourism (National Institute of Cultural Heritage (INPC) & Ministry of Culture and Heritage of Ecuador, 2022)..

The dual cultural and economic value supports the relevance of moving towards formal recognition processes such as the Guaranteed Traditional Speciality (GTS). This designation would contribute not only to preserving traditional production methods but also to guaranteeing benefits in terms of territorial marketing and international projection, as demonstrated by comparative experiences in other regions of Latin America (Gambarota, 2018; Guachamín & Pérez, 2022).

Potential for Guaranteed Traditional Speciality (GTS)

La Chola de Guano presents a profile that meets the criteria for its eventual registration as a Guaranteed Traditional Speciality (GTS). Its originality is reflected in its unique combination of savory dough and sweet panela filling, a characteristic firmly established in local memory and historical records that place its preparation back to the beginning of the 20th century (Moreira, 2024; Pilco, 2023). This uniqueness is preserved through the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, where family recipes have maintained the balance between basic ingredients and artisanal techniques.

Its reputation extends beyond the provincial level. The official declaration as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Ecuador in 2022, granted by the Ministry of Culture and the INPC, confirms its formal recognition and legitimizes its presence in tourist circuits as part of the Guano Pueblo Mágico brand (INPC & Ministry of Culture, 2022; González et al., 2023). Furthermore, the continued production of this bread in family bakeries and its association with community celebrations have strengthened its connection to the collective identity of the canton.

Documented tradition constitutes another fulfilled criterion. Oral testimonies and accounts from bakers maintain that the original recipe included fillings such as sambo squash, later replaced by panela (unrefined cane sugar) due to its greater availability, demonstrating the adaptation of the tradition without loss of authenticity (Pilco, 2023; Bonilla & Zhumi, 2022). These historical transformations have allowed the chola to remain a living heritage product, with a solid cultural foundation that supports its potential certification.

In terms of benefits, the Traditional Guaranteed Product (TGP) would not only offer legal protection against imitations and misuse of the name, but would also open new opportunities for tourism and commercial promotion. Comparable experiences, such as the certification of Cayambe biscuits in 2021, show how this type of recognition can boost the local economy, link traditional products to territorial marketing strategies, and strengthen community cohesion (Di Clemente et al., 2014; Article 2 BELÉN, 2022).

Feasibility of a Guaranteed Traditional Speciality (GTS) for the Chola de Guano Bread

The Chola de Guano bread possesses attributes that make it worthy of the formal requirements for a Guaranteed Traditional Speciality (GTS). Its originality lies in the unique combination of savory dough with a sweet filling of panela (unrefined cane sugar), pumpkin, or guava—an uncommon combination in Andean breadmaking that has become a defining characteristic of the canton (González et al., 2023). Regarding its reputation, the bread has transcended local boundaries, becoming a recognized gastronomic symbol at both the provincial and national levels, playing a central role in tourism in Guano, alongside products such as rugs and leather goods (Vallejo, 2025). Importantly, its traditional nature is documented in oral testimonies and historical records that confirm its artisanal production since the mid-20th century, passed down through generations of bakers (Erazo & Cobo, 2021). These elements suggest that the Chola de Guano meets the basic pillars to support a candidacy for the ETG.

However, viability requires overcoming complex situations and facing significant challenges. One of these is the scarcity of systematic research: although ethnographic studies and cultural descriptions exist, consolidated evidence in technical and economic areas is still lacking, which makes it difficult to structure a robust dossier according to international standards (Pilco, 2023). Standardizing the product is also complex, since variations in fillings (panela, pumpkin, guava) or fats (lard or butter) generate a diversity that is part of the cultural richness but could become an obstacle when defining a single technical specification (Cedeño et al., 2024). Another challenge is the compatibility between tradition and health regulations, since artisanal processes, such as the use of wooden troughs or wood-fired ovens, could conflict with the food safety requirements of formal certifications.

Despite these limitations, certification opens a horizon of opportunities. The Traditional Gastronomic Entity (TGE) could become a legal protection tool against imitations, guaranteeing

that the “Chola de Guano” seal is associated exclusively with authentic processes and local producers (Tiuquina, 2016). Furthermore, it would imply an economic and tourism boost, since official recognition would enhance Guano's image as a gastronomic and cultural destination, increasing the flow of visitors and revitalizing the local economy (León, 2024). Experiences such as that of the Cayambe biscuits demonstrate that the certification of traditional products can strengthen territorial identity and open differentiated markets, both nationally and in specialized international circuits (National Institute of Cultural Heritage (INPC) & Ministry of Culture and Heritage of Ecuador, 2022).

Critical analysis also compels us to consider the risks. Management and verification costs could be high for small producers who depend on family bakeries. Furthermore, certification requires association and organizational cohesion, conditions that are not always consolidated in the artisanal sector, where individual production logics prevail (Pilco, 2023). Finally, the rigidity of the technical specifications can jeopardize the diversity of family recipes, threatening the cultural richness of the product in the name of uniformity. This dilemma poses a challenge: how to guarantee authenticity without stifling the creativity and cultural variation that characterize the Chola de Guano.

Conclusions

The research confirms that the Chola de Guano transcends its status as a food item to become an identity and economic symbol of the canton. Its artisanal method, based on practices such as hand kneading, slow fermentation, and wood-fired baking, provides unique organoleptic characteristics that distinguish it from other bread-making traditions in Ecuador. Historical documentation and oral testimonies support its originality and intergenerational continuity, reinforcing its relevance as intangible cultural heritage.

From a socioeconomic perspective, the Chola has become a tourist and commercial attraction. Its inclusion in the Guano Pueblo Mágico program and its recognized presence at fairs, bakeries, and gastronomic circuits demonstrate that the product invigorates the local economy and fosters the integration of tradition and development. This dual dimensión, cultural and economic, legitimizes the search for protection mechanisms that guarantee its authenticity against imitation.

The critical analysis of the Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG) designation reveals, however, significant challenges. While the Chola meets the criteria of originality, reputation, and

documented tradition, product standardization, sanitary requirements, and the limited organization of producers present obstacles to overcome. Certification can offer benefits in terms of international visibility and regional marketing, but it requires a collective effort and public policies that balance heritage preservation with economic sustainability.

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