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Safeguarding Iloilo's Culinary Heritage

Food Safety Policy Options for La Paz Batchoy

Jade G. Pahila, Jose Marie A. Eslopor, Lhumen A. Tejano, Jihan Santanina S. Alumbro, Emiliza C. Lozada, Jin Chasina F. Decafe, and Johannes M. Magpusao

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Namit Gid!: A Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration for Ilonggo's Batchoy

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Food Safety Policy Options for La Paz Batchoy

Jade G. Pahila,[1] Jose Marie A. Eslopor,[1] Lhumen A. Tejano,[2] Jihan Santanina S. Alumbro,[3] Emiliza C. Lozada,[3] Jin Chasina F. Decafe,[3] and Johannes M. Magpusao[3]

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Key Highlights

- To sustain Iloilo City's credentials as a UNESCO City of Gastronomy, traditional La Paz batchoy operators must transition from experiential, generationally passed down hygiene habits to a formalized, preventive system. This shift requires standardizing operational controls across diverse vending formats—from established diners to street stalls—to eliminate hidden microbial threats while strictly preserving the dish's flavor profile and cultural authenticity.

- While governance is nationally codified under the Food Safety Act of 2013 (RA 10611) and the Sanitation Code (PD 856), a major compliance gap persists among micro and small enterprises. These businesses lack the technical literacy and infrastructure required for complex safety frameworks like HACCP, highlighting the need for localized, LGU-backed regulatory relief and practical guidance.

- Using field data and a focus group discussion with heritage pillars (Ted's, Alicia's, and Netong's), researchers mapped the batchoy preparation flow to isolate systemic biological and physical hazards. Key vulnerabilities include the high microbial and parasitic risks of uncleaned raw offal, cross-contamination from porous wooden chopping boards, and unstandardized handling of shrimp paste (*ginamos*), which frequently escapes early thermal treatment.

- The study provides a structured, nine-point roadmap centered on low-cost, high-impact administrative and physical reforms. These include establishing local supplier verification to secure raw material traceability, mandating calibrated thermometers for broth hot-holding, enforcing a transition to nonporous food-grade surfaces, and institutionalizing periodic, LGU-funded food handler certifications.

- The long-term economic and public health resilience of Iloilo's food tourism industry depends on moving away from reactive code enforcement toward proactive risk management. By adopting simple, accessible monitoring tools like standardized cleaning checklists and temperature logs, small-scale food businesses can achieve regulatory compliance without exhausting their limited financial resources.

Introduction

Food occupies a central place in a region's cultural identity (Fung 2018). Beyond sustenance, it sustains social cohesion, reinforces collective memory, and contributes to socioeconomic development while preserving cultural integrity within communities. At the same time, food systems are inseparable from public health concerns. The World Health Organization (WHO 2024) emphasizes that food safety is a fundamental requirement in preventing foodborne illnesses and safeguarding public health, particularly in contexts where traditional foods are integrated into expanding food tourism industries. This is especially evident in emerging gastronomic destinations where culturally significant foods are mainstreamed and widely consumed by both residents and visitors (Probe It Workplace Training 2025).

Iloilo City, designated as a UNESCO City of Gastronomy in 2023 (Rendon 2023), highlights La Paz batchoy as one of its iconic culinary heritage bearers. La Paz batchoy, or simply batchoy, is a well-known heritage noodle soup originating from the La Paz district. It is composed of several ingredients such as offal, green onions, and other fresh garnishes. It is also prepared and sold in diverse settings, including established restaurants, karinderyas, and ambulant stalls. These characteristics make batchoy culturally vibrant, yet they present food safety challenges. Risks may arise from improper handling of offal and meat, inadequate temperature control of broths, cross-contamination during preparation, and sanitation concerns in small-scale or street-vended operations. As Iloilo advances its trajectory as a City of Gastronomy, demand for batchoy has expanded significantly. This increased visibility and commercialization have exposed traditional preparation practices to greater scrutiny and regulatory pressures related to food safety compliance. Traditional batchoy preparation often relies on experiential knowledge, long-standing culinary techniques, and customary hygiene practices passed down through generations. While these practices reflect a rich culinary heritage, they may not always align fully with contemporary food safety standards. Such gaps may heighten risks associated with cross-contamination, improper temperature control, and sanitation lapses, particularly in high-volume service environments.

To better understand existing practices, identify potential hazards, and explore avenues for improvement within the batchoy food service process, a focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with key industry stakeholders. The discussion was facilitated by the UPV Food Safety Team in collaboration with the UPV Center for West Visayas Studies project team. Representatives from leading batchoy establishments—Ted's Oldtimer La Paz Batchoy, Alicia's

Special Batchoy, and Netong's Batchoy—participated in the consultation. The FGD aimed to facilitate systematic hazard identification across the batchoy food service chain, including raw material sourcing, storage, preparation, cooking, holding, and final serving.

The insights generated from this stakeholder engagement form the foundation of this food safety manual. By integrating established food safety principles with the lived experiences of batchoy practitioners, this discussion paper seeks to promote practical, culturally sensitive, and scientifically grounded guidelines that support both public health protection and the safeguarding of Iloilo's culinary heritage.

Overview of Food Safety

Food safety refers to the proper handling, preparation, storage, and serving of food in ways that ensure it does not cause harm to consumers when ingested. It is a fundamental component of public health protection and quality assurance within food systems. The practice of food safety is guided by the principle that food should remain wholesome and safe from contamination throughout the entire food production and service process, from raw material procurement to final consumption (WHO 2024).

Adherence to food safety principles provides both health and economic benefits. From a public health perspective, effective food safety practices reduce the incidence of foodborne illnesses caused by contaminated or improperly handled food. For food businesses, consistent implementation of safety standards promotes consumer confidence, enhances customer satisfaction, and supports long-term enterprise sustainability. In highly competitive food markets, particularly in areas where cuisine contributes to tourism and local identity, reliable food safety performance is essential in maintaining reputational integrity. Conversely, the sale of spoiled or contaminated food can result in foodborne disease outbreaks, loss of consumer trust, regulatory sanctions, financial losses, and potential closure of establishments (Chapman and Gunter 2018; Fung and Menon 2018).

Food safety management is grounded in the identification and control of hazards that may compromise food quality and safety. Hazards are broadly classified into biological, chemical, and physical categories. Biological hazards include pathogenic microorganisms and parasites that may proliferate under conditions of improper temperature control or poor hygiene. Chemical hazards

may arise from residues of cleaning agents, pesticides, pest control chemicals, or inappropriate food additives. Physical hazards refer to foreign materials such as hair, glass fragments, wood splinters, or other unintended objects that may be introduced during food preparation and handling (FAO 2023; WHO 2015).

Hazard assessment is a systematic process of identifying potential sources of risk and evaluating the likelihood and severity of adverse health effects. In food service operations, hazards may occur at any stage of the food flow system, including sourcing, storage, preparation, cooking, holding, and serving. Effective hazard assessment, therefore, requires a comprehensive understanding of production processes and operational conditions. Modern food safety management frameworks, such as Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP), emphasize preventive control measures by identifying critical control points where hazards can be effectively managed or eliminated (Codex Alimentarius Commission 2020).

In the Philippine context, food safety governance is primarily anchored in Republic Act No. 10611, or the Food Safety Act of 2013, which establishes a risk-based and farm-to-fork regulatory framework for food production and distribution. The law promotes the adoption of science-based safety systems and delineates responsibilities among government agencies and food business operators in ensuring safe food supply chains. Complementing this is the Sanitation Code of the Philippines (Presidential Decree No. 856), which provides standards for environmental sanitation, food establishment hygiene, and public health protection (Department of Health, Philippines [DOH] 1975).

Despite the existence of these regulatory frameworks, practical implementation challenges remain, particularly among micro, small, and medium-sized food enterprises. Limited infrastructure, variability in technical knowledge, and resource constraints may affect consistent compliance with formal food safety standards. Consequently, localized hazard assessment, practical guidance systems, and capacity-building interventions are necessary to translate national policies into operational practices suitable for traditional and small-scale food establishments. Given batchoy's ingredient profile and multistep preparation process, hazard assessment across its food flow system and discussion of practical interventions are critical to ensuring safety.

Focus Group Discussion

After a short overview on the importance of food safety, a focus group discussion (FGD) was facilitated by the food safety team. The batchoy operators and representatives present were from the business establishments, namely Ted's Oldtimer La Paz Batchoy, Alicia's Special Batchoy, and Netong's Batchoy.

The discussion aimed to facilitate hazard assessment of the processes involved in batchoy preparation and serving, and to identify possible mitigating measures to eliminate these food hazards and their potential risks. Initially, the processes involved were identified, starting from the sourcing of raw materials up to the serving of customers. Some of the collected information is presented below.

The preparation of batchoy is a controlled, multistep process designed to extract flavor, nutrients, and desirable sensory properties from animal-based raw materials while ensuring product safety and consistency. The process begins with broth production, which serves as the primary flavor carrier and thermal medium for the dish.

Pork bones—typically neck bones or ribs—are initially blanched in boiling water for several minutes to remove surface proteins, blood residues, and other impurities that may negatively affect broth clarity and flavor. This pre-treatment step improves both sensory quality and stability. The bones are then rinsed and transferred to a clean vessel containing fresh water. Aromatic vegetables, including whole onions, garlic, and ginger, are added alongside peppercorns to contribute volatile flavor compounds and mild antimicrobial effects during prolonged heating. Optional components such as pork liver trimmings, cleaned offal, beef bones, or shrimp shells may be incorporated to increase umami intensity through the release of amino acids, nucleotides, and minerals.

The mixture is simmered at a sub-boiling temperature for approximately 1.5 to 3 hours. This controlled thermal treatment facilitates collagen breakdown into gelatin, resulting in a broth with increased viscosity, enhanced mouthfeel, and a characteristic milky appearance. Toward the latter stage of cooking, the broth is seasoned with salt and fish sauce to adjust salinity and enhance savory perception; a small amount of soy sauce may be added for additional flavor complexity and color development. The inclusion of fish sauce in the

preparation of the broth depends on the establishment's formulation. Once the desired extraction is achieved, the broth is strained to remove particulate matter and maintained at high temperature to ensure microbial safety prior to serving.

Simultaneously with broth preparation, meat toppings are processed individually to preserve texture and prevent overcooking. Pork belly is boiled until tender, allowing fat to partially render while maintaining structural integrity, then sliced into thin portions for even distribution in the final product. Pork liver is sliced thinly and cooked briefly—either by blanching in hot broth or light sautéing—to minimize toughness and bitterness caused by prolonged heat exposure. Pork intestines and other offal undergo rigorous cleaning using salt and vinegar to reduce microbial load and remove residual odors, followed by boiling until tender and slicing into uniform pieces. Chicharon is prepared separately and lightly crushed to serve as a textural contrast and fat-based flavor enhancer during consumption.

Fresh miki noodles are treated with minimal processing to retain their soft yet elastic structure. They are rinsed briefly under running water to remove excess surface starch, then blanched in boiling water. This step gelatinizes the starches sufficiently to warm the noodles without compromising firmness. The noodles are immediately drained to prevent excessive water absorption and dilution of the broth.

The assembly of batchoy is carried out at the point of service to preserve thermal quality and sensory impact. Blanched miki noodles are placed in a serving bowl, followed by measured portions of pork belly, liver, and sliced offal. Boiling-hot broth is then poured over the components, simultaneously reheating the toppings and releasing aromatic compounds. Crushed chicharon is added generously, along with fried garlic and thinly sliced spring onions, contributing lipid-soluble flavors and visual appeal. In some servings, a raw egg is cracked directly into the bowl; residual heat from the broth induces partial protein coagulation, resulting in a creamy texture that enriches the soup.

Batchoy is served immediately while hot to ensure optimal flavor release, mouthfeel, and food safety. Condiments such as fish sauce, chili oil or crushed chili, additional chicharon, and optional kalamansi are provided to allow individual adjustment of salinity, heat, acidity, and texture. The final product reflects a balance of thermal processing, ingredient functionality, and sensory engineering, resulting in a deeply satisfying and culturally rooted noodle soup.

Raw Materials Variability and Supplier Control

During stakeholder discussions on the identification of potential hazard sources associated with raw materials, differing perspectives emerged based on the operational protocols of individual establishments. One key concern involved the sourcing of noodles (miki), a primary component of the dish. Most operators rely on external suppliers for noodle production, while a smaller number maintain in-house commissary capabilities. From a hazard analysis critical control point (HACCP) perspective, outsourced ingredients introduce an additional layer of supplier-dependent risk that must be addressed through verification and acceptance procedures. Although operators occasionally reported variations in saltiness affecting product consistency, these were characterized as quality issues rather than safety concerns. Importantly, no participants reported compromised freshness or microbiological safety concerns linked to outsourced noodles. Nonetheless, supplier control remains a preventive measure within the hazard analysis framework, emphasizing the need for documented sourcing standards, delivery inspection, and storage controls.

The procurement of pork from third-party suppliers was also discussed. Stakeholders did not identify significant food safety incidents associated with the meat supply. However, concerns were raised regarding quality variability, particularly inconsistencies in the lean-to-fat ratio. Excessively fatty cuts may require trimming, resulting in raw material losses and variability in broth composition. While primarily a quality control issue, inconsistent trimming practices can indirectly affect food safety if additional handling increases opportunities for cross-contamination. Under HACCP interpretation, this step reinforces the importance of supplier specifications and receiving inspections as preventive controls, ensuring that raw meat meets both safety and product standards before entering production.

Additional concerns were raised regarding complementary products served alongside batchoy, such as puto (rice cake) and pandesal (bread). These items may be produced in-house or sourced from external bakeries. For outsourced products, isolated reports of physical contamination, specifically the presence of foreign matter such as hair, were noted. This represents a physical hazard that underscores the importance of supplier hygiene verification and incoming product inspection. Within a HACCP system, such hazards are addressed through prerequisite programs focusing on supplier approval, packaging integrity checks, and rejection protocols for nonconforming goods. Establishments producing bread in-house retain direct control over sanitation and personnel hygiene, thereby reducing reliance on external safety practices.

Collectively, these discussions highlight that raw material hazards are not limited to biological risks alone but also include quality variability and physical contamination. Effective hazard management at the supplier level functions as a preventive control that supports downstream Critical Control Points (CCP). Strengthening supplier verification, documentation, and receiving procedures ensures that hazards are minimized before ingredients enter the production environment, aligning operational practices with HACCP principles of proactive risk management.

Preparation of Batchoy

Batchoy preparation involves a sequence of handling and processing steps that begin with the receiving of primary raw materials, including meat, bones, and edible innards, as well as supporting ingredients such as spices and seasonings. Upon receipt, operators typically perform a visual quality inspection to evaluate freshness and suitability. Indicators assessed include the fat-to-lean ratio of pork, discoloration or the presence of excessive residual blood in the liver, and other observable markers of spoilage. From a food safety perspective, this receiving step functions as an initial hazard screening point, where biological hazards associated with contaminated meat and offal may be introduced if supplier controls are inadequate. Under HACCP principles, supplier verification and acceptance criteria serve as preventive controls at this stage.

Following inspection, ingredients undergo washing, weighing, and draining to remove visible contaminants and excess moisture prior to cooking. While washing reduces surface contamination, it does not eliminate microbial hazards. Therefore, subsequent thermal processing remains the primary critical control measure. Operators have identified particular concerns related to raw innards, which are recognized as high-risk ingredients due to the potential presence of parasites and pathogenic microorganisms. This reinforces the importance of adequate cooking as a critical control point, where time–temperature parameters must be sufficient to achieve pathogen destruction.

Another identified hazard source is the use of wooden chopping boards, crates, and other wooden materials. These surfaces may harbor microorganisms and present a risk of physical contamination through splinters or wood fragments. Within a HACCP framework, this issue is addressed through prerequisite programs (PRPs), including equipment sanitation, maintenance, and the use of food-grade, nonporous preparation surfaces to minimize cross-contamination.

Variations in broth preparation practices were observed among operators, particularly in the handling of shrimp paste ("ginamos"). Some establishments sauté or cook the shrimp paste prior to addition, while others introduce it directly into the broth without pre-cooking. From a hazard analysis perspective, uncooked additions represent a potential biological hazard if the ingredient carries microbial load. When added directly, safety relies entirely on the subsequent boiling step to function as a CCP capable of eliminating pathogens. Consistent application of adequate thermal treatment is therefore critical to ensure hazard control regardless of preparation style.

Serving

During the serving stage, operators implement several practices intended to reduce contamination risks and maintain sanitary conditions. These include maintaining personal hygiene among food handlers, sanitizing utensils through immersion in hot water prior to service, implementing pest control measures, and practicing proper waste management. Within HACCP terminology, these actions are classified primarily as prerequisite programs that support the overall safety system by controlling environmental and operational hazards.

Of particular importance in this stage is temperature management. The broth and cooked meat components must be held at temperatures that prevent bacterial growth, effectively making hot holding a Critical Control Point. Failure to maintain safe holding temperatures may allow rapid microbial proliferation even after adequate cooking. Utensil sanitation and hygienic handling serve as operational controls that minimize recontamination after the cooking CCP has been achieved.

The presence of pest control chemicals inside food establishments introduces an additional chemical hazard consideration. While pest management is necessary, improper storage or application of insecticides may create contamination risks. HACCP interpretation requires that pest control measures be integrated into a structured sanitation program, ensuring separation of chemicals from food contact areas and adherence to approved application procedures.

Overall, the serving stage represents a critical interface between controlled production and consumer exposure. Effective hygiene practices, temperature control, and environmental sanitation collectively function to preserve the safety achieved during earlier CCPs and prevent post-cooking contamination.

Recommendations

The findings of the focus group discussion highlight that food safety risks in batchoy enterprises arise primarily from raw material variability, handling of high-risk animal ingredients, temperature control gaps, and environmental sanitation practices. While operators demonstrate awareness of hygiene, risk management remains largely informal and dependent on individual experience. From a food safety and risk assessment perspective, the following policy recommendations are proposed to strengthen hazard prevention, standardize controls, and support sustainable compliance among batchoy enterprises.

1. Institutionalize Supplier Verification Systems

Local authorities and industry associations should promote formal supplier verification mechanisms to reduce hazard entry at the raw material stage. Batchoy establishments should maintain approved supplier lists and implement standardized receiving inspections covering freshness, temperature, packaging integrity, and evidence of contamination. Documentation of deliveries improves traceability and enables rapid response in the event of foodborne illness investigations. Supplier verification functions as a preventive control aligned with HACCP principles and reduces reliance on downstream corrective measures.

2. Standardize Thermal Processing Requirements

Thermal processing must be recognized as the primary Critical Control Point for biological hazard elimination. Policy guidance should establish minimum internal cooking temperatures for pork and offal and safe hot-holding thresholds for broth and cooked components. Operators should be encouraged to use calibrated thermometers and maintain simple temperature logs. Standardizing time–temperature expectations across establishments reduces variability and ensures consistent pathogen destruction.

3. Strengthen Cross-Contamination Controls in Preparation Areas

Regulatory guidance should promote the transition toward food-grade, nonporous preparation surfaces and the physical separation of raw and cooked food handling zones. Color-coded utensils and structured sanitation schedules should be adopted as part of prerequisite programs. These controls reduce the risk of recontamination after cooking and support the effectiveness of established CCPs.

4. Enhance Controls for High-Risk Offal Handling

Because edible innards present elevated biological risk, policy guidance should include standardized cleaning and cooking procedures for offal. Refrigerated storage, minimized ambient exposure, and validated cooking practices should be emphasized. Targeted training modules for handling high-risk animal products would significantly reduce parasite and pathogen hazards.

5. Regulate Hot Holding and Service Conditions

Food safety policies should explicitly address temperature maintenance during service. Broth and toppings must be held at temperatures that prevent microbial growth, and holding times should be minimized. Mixing fresh and old batches should be discouraged. These measures preserve the safety achieved during cooking and prevent post-process contamination.

6. Integrate Pest Control into Structured Sanitation Programs

Guidance should require the separation of pest control chemicals from food contact areas and adherence to approved application procedures. Establishments should maintain records of pest control activities to reduce chemical contamination risks while preserving effective environmental sanitation.

7. Institutionalize Food Handler Training

Mandatory periodic food safety training for operators and staff should be supported by local government units. Training should focus on hazard awareness, temperature control, cross-contamination prevention, and personal hygiene. Strengthening human capacity transforms knowledge into consistent safety behavior and reduces reliance on reactive enforcement.

8. Promote Simple Monitoring and Recordkeeping Systems

Even small enterprises benefit from basic documentation practices. Temperature logs, cleaning checklists, receiving inspection forms, and pest control records enable verification of food safety controls and encourage accountability. Policy support should prioritize low-cost, easy-to-adopt recordkeeping systems suitable for micro and small food businesses.

9. Encourage Industry Standardization and Voluntary Certification

The development of shared food safety guidelines specific to batchoy production can harmonize practices while preserving culinary identity. Voluntary compliance programs or local certification schemes may enhance consumer trust and incentivize adherence to best practices.

Collectively, these policy directions shift food safety management from reactive correction toward preventive risk control, consistent with HACCP philosophy and modern public health frameworks.

Conclusion

La Paz Batchoy remains one of Iloilo City's most important culinary heritage foods; however, its safety must be consistently assured as demand and production scale increase. The hazard assessment indicates that the primary food safety risks in batchoy operations are associated with high-risk raw materials (particularly pork and offal), supplier variability, potential cross-contamination during preparation, and inadequate temperature control during cooking and hot holding. While most establishments demonstrate good hygiene awareness, existing controls are often informal and not yet fully aligned with a structured, risk-based food safety system.

From a HACCP perspective, the safety of batchoy depends largely on strong prerequisite programs (PRPs) and effective management of critical control points (CCPs), particularly thermal processing and hot holding. The risks identified in this study can be significantly reduced through strengthened supplier verification, standardized time–temperature controls, improved separation of raw and cooked handling areas, and more systematic sanitation and pest management practices. These improvements are practical and achievable even for micro and small enterprises when supported by simple monitoring tools and targeted food safety training.

Safeguarding La Paz batchoy ultimately requires a collaborative model that recognizes traditional knowledge while progressively aligning practices with modern food safety expectations. By institutionalizing risk-based controls without undermining culinary authenticity, Iloilo City can protect public health, strengthen the resilience of its batchoy industry, and reinforce its standing as a responsible and sustainable City of Gastronomy.

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