Machindra K. Gaikwad, 2026, 14:2
ISSN (Online): 2348-4098
ISSN (Print): 2395-4752

International Journal of Science, Engineering and Technology
An Open Access Journal

Food Object Detection Using YOLO Model

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Abstract- Food object detection has emerged as a critical research area in the intersection of computer vision and nutritional informatics. This paper presents a comprehensive study on the application of YOLO (You Only Look Once) models for real-time food item recognition and classification. Accurate food detection is fundamental to calorie estimation, dietary tracking, and smart kitchen applications. We investigate the evolution from YOLOv1 through YOLOv8, analysing architectural improvements, training strategies, and performance trade-offs on benchmark food datasets including FOOD-101, UEC-Food256, and a custom annotated dataset of Indian cuisines. Experimental results demonstrate that YOLOv8 achieves a mean Average Precision (mAP@0.5) of 91.3% on the FOOD-101 dataset while maintaining real-time inference speeds of 42 FPS on standard GPU hardware. The study further explores transfer learning, data augmentation, and anchor-box optimization as techniques to improve detection accuracy across diverse food categories. Our findings suggest that YOLO-based architectures are well-suited for deployment in mobile and edge computing environments for dietary assessment applications.

Keywords: Food Detection, YOLO, Object Detection, Deep Learning, Convolutional Neural Networks, Dietary Assessment, Computer Vision, Transfer Learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

The growing prevalence of diet-related health concerns such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease has intensified interest in automated dietary monitoring systems. Manual food journaling is tedious, error-prone, and largely ineffective in long-term compliance. Computer vision-based approaches, particularly those leveraging deep learning, have demonstrated remarkable promise in automating food recognition from images, enabling seamless integration into mobile dietary applications.

Object detection—the task of identifying and localizing objects within an image—forms the backbone of any automated food recognition pipeline. Traditional approaches relied on hand-crafted features and sliding-window techniques, which were computationally expensive and limited in scalability. The advent of deep convolutional neural networks (CNNs) transformed the landscape, enabling high-accuracy detection at unprecedented speeds.

Among modern detection frameworks, YOLO (You Only Look Once), introduced by Redmon et al. in 2016, revolutionized the field by reframing object detection as a single regression problem, predicting bounding boxes and class probabilities simultaneously from a full image in one evaluation. This unified architecture enables real-time detection, making it particularly attractive for mobile applications where latency is critical.

The challenges specific to food detection include high intra-class variability (e.g., different presentations of the same dish), inter-class similarity (e.g., roti vs. paratha), occlusion, non-uniform lighting in restaurant or kitchen environments, and the need to handle a vast number of categories encompassing global and regional cuisines. This paper comprehensively investigates the application of YOLO models to the food domain, proposing optimized strategies for improved accuracy and inference speed.

The main contributions of this paper are

- A systematic comparative analysis of YOLO versions (v1 through v8) applied to food detection tasks.
- Evaluation on multiple benchmark datasets including FOOD-101, UEC-Food256, and a curated Indian cuisine dataset with 50 categories.

- Proposed data augmentation and transfer learning pipeline achieving state-of-the-art performance.
- Deployment feasibility analysis for edge devices including Raspberry Pi 4 and NVIDIA Jetson Nano.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research in food recognition has evolved substantially over the past two decades. Early works by Chenetal. (2009) employed Support Vector Machines (SVM) with color and texture histograms to classify food images, achieving modest accuracy on small datasets. Bossed et al. (2014) introduced the FOOD-101 dataset—a benchmark comprising 101,000 images across 101 food categories—and demonstrated that CNN-based features outperformed handcrafted counterparts by a large margin.

Yanai and Kawano (2015) applied GoogLeNet for food recognition, obtaining 73.7% top-1 accuracy on FOOD-101. Subsequent works explored multi-scale feature fusion and attention mechanisms to capture the hierarchical visual cues inherent in food images. Liu et al. (2016) introduced the SSD (Single Shot MultiBox Detector) framework which, alongside YOLO, became a dominant paradigm for real-time detection.

Regarding YOLO-based food detection, Ciocca et al. (2017) applied YOLOv2 to tray-based cafeteria food detection, demonstrating feasibility in constrained canteen environments. Aguilar et al. (2019) extended this to mobile deployment, using YOLOv3-tiny for real-time food logging applications. More recent work by Mezgec et al. (2021) employed YOLOv4 with mosaic augmentation and achieved 85.2% mAP on a European food dataset.

Despite these advances, few studies have comprehensively benchmarked successive YOLO generations on identical food datasets, nor have they addressed the specific challenges of Indian cuisine detection—a domain characterized by visually similar dishes across diverse regional traditions. This paper addresses these gaps with rigorous experimental evaluation and practical deployment guidance.

III. YOLO ARCHITECTURE AND EVOLUTION

YOLOv1: Foundational Framework

YOLOv1 partitioned the input image into an S×S grid. Each cell predicted B bounding boxes (x, y, w, h, confidence) and C class probabilities. The network comprised 24 convolutional layers followed by 2 fully connected layers.

While achieving 45 FPS on a Titan X GPU, YOLOv1 struggled with small objects and groups of closely packed items—both common in food imagery.

YOLOv2 (YOLO9000)

YOLOv2 introduced anchor boxes derived via k-means clustering on training bounding boxes, Batch Normalization across all convolutional layers, a high-resolution classifier pertained at 448×448, and multi-scale training. The pass through layer enabled fine-grained features from earlier layers, improving detection of smaller food items. YOLOv2 achieved 76.8 mAP on VOC 2007 at 67 FPS.

YOLOv3

YOLOv3 adopted Darknet-53 as backbone—a 53-layer network with residual connections—and implemented multi-scale predictions at three different scales using feature pyramid concepts. Three anchors were used per scale, totaling nine anchor boxes. Binary cross-entropy replaced softmax for class prediction, enabling multi-label classification. These improvements significantly boosted detection of small, medium, and large food objects.

YOLOv4 and YOLOv5

YOLOv4 introduced a suite of 'bag of freebies' (data augmentation techniques including mosaic, CutMix, DropBlock) and 'bag of specials' (activation improvements such as Mish, spatial pyramid pooling, PANet path aggregation), achieving 43.5% AP on COCO at 65 FPS. YOLOv5, released by Ultralytics in 2020, offered architectural flexibility (nano to extra-large variants), built-in auto-anchor

computation, and seamless PyTorch integration, democratizing YOLO usage.

YOLOv8: State-of-the-Art Architecture

YOLOv8 represents the current state of the art, employing a C2f backbone module (Cross-Stage Partial with two bottlenecks), a decoupled head separating objectness, classification, and regression branches, and anchor-free detection eliminating manual anchor design.

YOLOv8n achieves real-time inference on CPUs, while YOLOv8x achieves 53.9% mAP on COCO. For food detection, the decoupled head and anchor-free design reduce false positives in cluttered plate scenarios.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Dataset Preparation

Three datasets were utilized in this study:

FOOD-101: 101,000 images spanning 101 food categories, with 750 training and 250 test images per class. Images sourced from foodspotting.com contain real-world noise.

UEC-Food256: 31,395 images across 256 food categories with bounding box annotations, making it suitable for direct object detection training.

IndianFoodDet-50 (Proposed): A custom dataset of 15,000 images across 50 Indian food categories (dosa, idli, biryani, paneer butter masala, etc.) annotated using LabelImg with YOLO-format labels.

Data Augmentation

To address class imbalance and improve generalization, the following augmentation pipeline was applied during training:

- Mosaic augmentation: Combining four training images into one, exposing the model to diverse scale and context combinations. Random horizontal flipping, rotation (±15°), and shearing (±10°).
- Color jitter: Random brightness (±0.4), contrast (±0.3), saturation (±0.7), and hue (±0.015) perturbations.
- Cutout regularization: Randomly masking 10–30% of the image to improve robustness to occlusion.
- MixUp blending: Linearly interpolating two images and their labels at ratio $\lambda \sim \text{Beta}(8.0, 8.0)$.

Transfer Learning Strategy

All YOLO variants were initialized with weights pretrained on the COCO dataset (80 categories). Fine-tuning proceeded in two stages: (1) Frozen backbone for 20 epochs to adapt the detection head to food categories, followed by (2) Full network fine-tuning for 80 epochs with cosine learning rate decay from 0.01 to 0.0001. This progressive approach prevented catastrophic forgetting while enabling domain-specific feature adaptation.

Anchor Box Optimization

Custom anchor boxes were computed via k-means clustering (k=9) on the bounding box dimensions of each food dataset. For the IndianFoodDet-50 dataset, the optimized anchors yielded a 3.7% improvement in mAP over COCO default anchors, reflecting the distinct aspect ratios of Indian dishes (e.g., round roti vs. elongated samosa).

Experimental Setup

Experiments were conducted on a workstation equipped with an NVIDIA RTX 3090 GPU (24 GB VRAM), Intel Core i9-12900K CPU, and 64 GB RAM. Training employed PyTorch 2.0 with Ultralytics YOLOv8 library. Input resolution was fixed at 640×640 pixels. Batch size of 16 was used with AdamW optimizer and weight decay of 0.0005.

V. RESULTS AND EVALUATION

Performance Comparison on FOOD-101

Table 1 summarizes the detection performance of different YOLO versions on the FOOD-101 dataset:

Model	mAP@0.5 (%)	mAP@0.5:0.95 (%)	FPS (GPU)	Params (M)
YOLOv3	74.2	51.8	38	61.5
YOLOv4	81.6	58.3	43	64.4
YOLOv5s	84.1	62.7	112	7.2
YOLOv5x	88.4	67.9	53	86.7
YOLOv8n	85.9	64.2	198	3.2
YOLOv8s	88.7	68.4	134	11.2

YOLOv8m	90.2	71.1	79	25.9
YOLOv8x	91.3	73.8	42	68.2

Table 1: YOLO model comparison on FOOD-101 dataset

Performance on UEC-Food256 and IndianFood Det-50

Model	FOOD-101 mAP	UEC-Food256 mAP	IndianFoodDet-50 mAP
YOLOv5s	84.1%	76.4%	78.9%
YOLOv8s	88.7%	82.1%	85.3%
YOLOv8m	90.2%	85.6%	88.7%
YOLOv8x	91.3%	87.2%	90.4%

Table 2: Cross-dataset performance comparison

Ablation Study

An ablation study was conducted to quantify the contribution of each proposed component on the IndianFoodDet-50 dataset using YOLOv8m as the baseline:

Configuration	mAP@0.5 (%)	mAP@0.5:0.95 (%)
Baseline (COCO weights)	82.3	61.4
+ Custom anchors	84.1	63.2
+ Mosaic augmentation	86.5	66.8
+ MixUp & Cutout	87.9	68.3
+ Progressive fine-tuning	88.7	70.1
Full proposed pipeline	90.4	72.6

Table 3: Ablation study results on Indian FoodDet-50

Edge Deployment Analysis

For practical deployment in mobile dietary applications, inference was tested on resource-constrained devices using YOLOv8n with TensorRT and ONNX optimization:

Device	Framework	FPS	Latency (ms)	Power (W)
NVIDIA RTX 3090	TensorRT FP16	198	5.1	~120
NVIDIA Jetson Nano	TensorRT FP16	28	35.7	~5
Raspberry Pi 4 (4GB)	ONNX Runtime	6	167	~4
Google Coral USB	TFLite INT8	19	52.6	~2

Table 4: Edge device deployment performance of YOLOv8n

VI. DISCUSSION

The experimental results confirm that YOLOv8 variants consistently outperform earlier YOLO generations on food detection tasks, attributed primarily to the anchor-free detection head, C2f backbone, and improved training recipe. YOLOv8x achieves the highest accuracy (91.3% mAP@0.5 on FOOD-101), while YOLOv8n provides remarkable real-time capability on edge devices.

The proposed custom anchor clustering yielded meaningful gains (+1.8% mAP), underscoring the importance of domain-specific configuration for food imagery, where object aspect ratios differ substantially from general COCO datasets. The progressive fine-tuning strategy proved particularly beneficial, preventing early over fitting by initially adapting only the detection head before allowing backbone updates.

The IndianFoodDet-50 dataset results (90.4% mAP with the full pipeline) demonstrate the viability of extending YOLO-based detection to regional cuisine categories that are underrepresented in existing benchmark datasets. Classes such as biryani, chole, and pavbhaji, which share similar visual ranging from 82% to 97%.textures (rice grains, gravy, bread), presented the greatest detection challenges, with per-class AP values.

A key practical finding is that YOLOv8n with TensorRT optimization achieves 28 FPS on the

NVIDIA Jetson Nano—sufficient for real-time mobile food logging—while consuming only ~5W, enabling battery-powered deployment. The Google Coral USB accelerator provides a compelling ultra-low-power option for IoT-based smart kitchen applications.

Limitations of this study include the relatively small size of the IndianFoodDet-50 dataset (15,000 images), which may limit generalization to unseen dish variations. Future work should incorporate semi-supervised learning to leverage large volumes of unlabeled food images available online. Additionally, portion size estimation through depth estimation or stereo vision remains an open challenge for complete dietary assessment systems.

VII. APPLICATIONS

Dietary Monitoring and Calorie Estimation
Integration of food detection with nutritional databases (e.g., USDA FoodData Central) enables automated calorie and macronutrient estimation. Detected food items are mapped to nutritional profiles, with portion size estimated from reference object dimensions or depth cues.

Smart Kitchen and Restaurant Automation
Real-time food detection enables inventory management, automatic dish identification for billing, quality control in food processing, and allergen alerting in smart kitchen ecosystems. YOLO's real-time capability allows continuous monitoring without buffering delays.

Healthcare and Clinical Nutrition
Hospitals and care facilities can employ food detection systems to monitor patient meal consumption, ensuring compliance with therapeutic diets. The system can alert nutritionists when contraindicated foods are consumed by patients with specific conditions.

Agricultural and Food Safety Inspection
YOLO-based detection can automate inspection of food products on production lines, identifying defects, foreign objects, and quality deviations. The high throughput of YOLOv8 makes it suitable for industrial conveyor belt inspection environments.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a comprehensive study of YOLO-based food object detection, spanning architectural analysis from YOLOv1 to YOLOv8, multi-dataset experimental evaluation, ablation studies, and edge deployment profiling. The proposed training pipeline—combining custom anchor optimization, mosaic and MixUp augmentation, and progressive fine-tuning—achieves 91.3% mAP@0.5 on FOOD-101 and 90.4% on the proposed IndianFoodDet-50 dataset.

The findings establish YOLO as a premier framework for food detection across both high-accuracy cloud deployments and resource-constrained edge devices. The introduction of the IndianFoodDet-50 dataset contributes a valuable resource for the community, addressing the significant gap in detection benchmarks for South Asian cuisines.

Future research directions include incorporating transformer-based backbones (e.g., Vision Transformers) for improved global context modelling, developing 3D food volume estimation for accurate portion quantification, and exploring federated learning to train on distributed mobile dietary logs while preserving user privacy. The convergence of accurate food detection, nutritional intelligence, and edge AI holds transformative potential for personalized healthcare and preventive nutrition.

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