

The importance of traditional food quality — the viewpoint of the tourism

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Abstract: This study provides an approach to the relationship between gastronomy and tourism, with a particular focus on the quality of traditional food. In recent years, since the world became a “global village” and people worldwide could access the Internet, it is easy for enthusiastic tourists and business travellers to acquire information about diverse destinations, thus aiding the growth of globalization and the tourism industries. This study explains to what extent gastronomy and traditional food are relevant to development of tourism and why it is crucial to offer visitors and tourists unique, traditional meals of high quality. Larger cities were considered for the case study in Serbia. The study highlights the importance of traditional food in creating overall, memorable tourist experiences, given that tradition, culture and food are strongly imprinted in the identity of each country.

Keywords: gastronomy, traditional food, tourist experience, cultural identity.

Introduction

It is in human nature to explore, learn and try new things. This encompasses interesting, enriching experiences, awakening all senses — to taste something new, to see something never seen before, to hear different sounds, to smell extraordinary fragrances or to touch new shapes (Tikkanen, 2007). Without such new experiences, the life of many would be less exciting, and these specific needs contribute to people’s leisure travel, consequently leading to tourism blossoming and business growing, positively impacting the entire economic sphere and labour market (Hsu, 2015). Cultural experience can also be expressed through food (Long, 2004). However, a food destination needs to be authentic in order to be recognized by tourists (Sánchez-Cañizares and López-Guzmán, 2012).

Food awakens all our senses. It is not just about taste – it is also about the scent that caresses our nostrils while smelling food; it is about the way the food is decorated, to make our eyes shine; it is about the feeling we have on our fingertips when we touch it, and last, but not least – it is about the crunchy sound we hear when we bite or nibble it, followed by the soft and pleasant sound of a favourite food gliding smoothly through the throat. All of

these experiences are even more intensive when it comes to traditional food (Zhang, 2019). In a way, food always follows us, anywhere we go (Steinmetz, 2010). In fact, foods we encounter in the early age of our lives leave a big impact on our memories and digestive systems. The human senses of smell and taste are inseparable, and they both recognize biochemical components when consuming food, which confirms the fact that these two senses function closely together. In order to obtain the sensation of flavour, the senses of smell and taste need to collaborate closely (Sims, 2009).

Therefore, some tourists like to bring with them specific spices or drinks, as these help them to bring back pleasant memories and feelings. If it is not possible to bring some ingredients, tourists can decide to eat the food that is mostly similar to their traditional food, regardless of whether their visit to another country is for business or pleasure. Traditional food can be defined in many ways, but the simplest explanation is that it refers to dishes/foods that are passed from one generation to another (Hotz and Gibson, 2007). In nearly all countries, this preserves the traditional food heritage, which is the inseparable ingredient of each country’s unique tradition. Traditional food is also a major component marking the dietary habits of people (Alibabic et al., 2012).

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Literature review

In a tourism sense, authentic traditional foods help countries to be well-positioned on the global tourist map and recognized among other destinations (Bertella, 2011). In today's competitive world, it is of the utmost significance to be distinguishable and memorable, and good traditional food can be a major ally in achieving that goal. Food can boost the status of the destination, because it includes elements of lifestyle, local creation and cultural tradition (Tsai and Wang, 2017), but also contributes to the destination's promotion and financial status (Henderson, 2009). Tourists can buy food and beverage souvenirs over the Internet, even when they are far from the visited destination (Hall and Sharples, 2008).

Together with beverages, traditional foods can be produced as homemade products by restaurants, small catering companies and large but local manufacturers or simply created in-house. Some traditional foods have geographical indications or are traditional specialties in the EU (European Union) designation scheme, which indicates they have protected designation of origin (Kilibarda et al., 2018a).

All these elements help to serve prosperity and maintain a living cultural heritage with local food. Through many different cultural events, traditional food (very often cheeses or wines) as a unique offer from a particular destination is very often provided for both local and foreign visitors. Gastronomy, including traditional food, as a valuable cultural element, can draw tourist attention, additional to other cultural attractions such as museums, festivals and fairs (Correia et al., 2008). Food fairs and wine tours are some of the many ways to help visitors explore tourist destinations, allowing them to discover something specific while visiting food destinations. Authentic traditional foods have their charm as one of the key elements that contribute to development of a tourism industry (Bessiere and Tibere, 2013).

On the other hand, if tourist expectations are not met when consuming local dishes, the individual's opinion can negatively affect local tourism (Sánchez-Cañizares and López-Guzmán, 2012). Many studies report the importance of food for tourism to progress (Ivanova et al. 2014). Food events positively affect local tourism, helping people to maintain jobs in hotel and catering industries (Richards, 2014). The concept of unique food makes it easy to present a country, its distinguishable culture and distinct history. Home-made food can be an incredible advantage for tourists exploring the culture

of a destination, which means that local dishes are linked to visitor adventure (Rilakovic, 2013).

Food is an important part in the tourism industry because traditional food is one of the attributes of a destination that can be used to promote tourism. What is certain is that the sale of traditional food to tourists is very important for the destination. Increasing the supply of traditional food and local food products within catering facilities is very encouraging for sustainable tourism growth, and according to research by Sims (2009), traditional food can play an important role in connecting tourists with local culture.

Kim and Eves (2012) investigated the reasons why tourists tend to experiment with traditional gastronomic specialties and came to the following conclusions:

1. getting acquainted with a new culture and gaining new knowledge and experiences,
2. developing interpersonal relations and creating the opportunity to make new acquaintances,
3. excitement and escape from routine,
4. sensory pleasures: taste and aroma seem attractive to them,
5. health care: whether they avoid or try local food, people who have a developed awareness of and highly value health their are guided by this principle.

Whether tourists accept local food depends on several factors, primarily their culture, nationality and personality. Thus, Chang et al. (2010) claimed that tourists show the so-called "culturally-specific core eating behaviour", which largely determines their preferences. Culture is an integral part of the human values system and largely determines our dietary preferences. National cuisine is marked by its composition, meal preparation methods and the culture of enjoyment. In general, tourists find it easier to accept differences in foods that are not crucial in their daily diet. Here, food can be classified as core or peripheral: core foods are closely related to culture and require the greatest effort to change them.

Also, not all nationalities are equally open to trying new specialties. Torres (2002) agreed with this, saying the tendency to try traditional food certainly depends on nationality, and he believed that most people do not want to try local specialties. According to Fields (2002), in addition to nationality, there are other personal characteristics that influence whether a tourist will try traditional food. Some people are motivated to try local food to complement

their experience of local culture, while others experience the enjoyment of local specialties as prestigious. Middle-class intellectuals seem most likely to try local specialties, as *Heldke* (2003) explains: “This cultivated ‘taste’ in foreign cuisine can enhance an individual’s level of sophistication, which is important for raising stature in future social situations.”

Methodology and methods

The research was conducted in the period from October 2019 to March 2020 in six cities (Belgrade (BG), Novi Sad (NS), Nis (NI), Smederevo (SD), Subotica (SU) and Valjevo (VA)) in Serbia. The questionnaire contained 16 questions, 13 statements in the form of a Likert scale (7 point, where 1 stands for strongly disagree and 7 stands for strongly agree) and 3 socio-demographic questions. To better determine the attitudes of the respondents and explain the results, the average scores obtained by the Likert scale were classified into three categories: scores from 1 to 2.5 indicate a negative attitude; from 2.5 to 5 indicate a neutral attitude, while grades from 5 to 7 indicate a positive attitude. The population sample consisted of 94 respondents, aged between 18–60. Male respondents (66%) dominated over females (34%). Work status among respondents: employed (43.21), unemployed (39.9%), students (16.89%). Methods used in this study were: content analysis; data classification; data and information processing; online survey research. Descriptive statistics were obtained using SPSS.

Results and discussion

The survey of consumer opinion on traditional food (Table 1) indicated interesting data/opinions regarding local traditional dishes and their consumption.

After categorising the Likert scale scores, respondents did not express a negative attitude towards any of the statements, which is a good indicator because with adequate measures and activities, neutral attitudes can be turned into positive ones (*Živković and Brdar, 2018*).

An interesting result obtained by the research is that the respondents showed a neutral attitude with regard to the nature of the product – whether traditional food is natural, organic, and whether it is produced in the local area. Bearing in mind that the production of organic food most often requires

traditional, conventional production methods (*Thøgersen et al., 2017*), a question that should be further explored in future research is whether, and to what extent, people in Serbia are familiar with the concept of organic food.

Regional and local cuisines are key to differentiating from other cuisines in a highly competitive environment. Tourists have recognized the importance of local and regional gastronomy because this is, above all, a reminder of the history and tradition of the area, and local cuisine helps tourists become acquainted with the destination. This was confirmed by our study, since traditional food provided respondents with a connection with history. For the statement *When consuming traditional food, I contemplate about the history behind each and every dish*, respondents from Smederevo had the most positive attitude (6.91). This result could possibly be due to the fact that, although it is the smallest city included in the research, its rich history (e.g. Smederevo is the former capital of the earlier Serbian state, and it is positioned along the Roman border (Limes)) contributes to the recognisability of this area. Also, this region boasts recognisable traditional dishes — Smederevo perch and grapevine-leaf sarma (a local version of Greek vine dolmades).

Traditional, local food can play a key role in creating the identity and brand of the local community, facilitating the connection of tourists and destinations, enabling the development of agricultural activities, entrepreneurship and job creation, which directly contributes to strengthening the economy of a local community (*Du Rand et al., 2003*). Local food can be an attraction for a destination, and can be used to promote tourism. Therefore, it is not unusual that the respondents from Valjevo had the most positive attitude regarding the recognisability of traditional food (5.89), the connection between taste and climate (5.71), and food production in the local area (5.37). The most famous gastronomic product of Valjevo is, of course, fine pork crackling, reminiscent, in form, of tobacco and locally called *duvan čvarci*, such that this gastronomic product has its own festival, “Days of Valjevo Tobacco-cracklings”. Livestock and fruit growing are well-developed here, so the local cuisine is rich in cheese, *kajmak* (a thick, fermented clotted cream), meat and fruit. Plums and raspberries are widely grown, and forest fruits are also harvested, primarily mushrooms. The Valjevo region is also known for pies, cornbread (*proja*) made from millstone-ground flour, Valjevo cheese and *kajmak*, Valjevo meadow cabbage soup, etc., which are prepared from locally produced

Table 1. Consumer perceptions, indicated by average Likert scale scores, related to traditional food products in Belgrade (BG), Novi Sad (NS), Nis (NI), Smederevo (SD), Subotica (SU) and Valjevo (VA).

Statement	BG	NS	NI	SM	SU	VA	Average across all cities
When consuming traditional food, I contemplate about the history behind each and every dish	5.83	5.68	5.66	6.91	6.12	6.03	6.04
Home-made food is well recognized	5.55	5.42	5.55	5.71	5.73	5.89	5.64
The quality of home-made food depends on the season	5.49	5.93	5.69	5.10	5.22	5.66	5.51
In my opinion, we can eat traditional food every day	5.22	5.51	5.23	4.99	4.80	5.54	5.21
Traditional food does not exist without good local recipes	5.06	5.48	5.69	5.22	5.79	5.77	5.50
Authentic traditional food is related to tastes that are characteristic of a given climate	4.95	5.49	5.61	5.12	5.59	5.71	5.41
In order to enjoy traditional authentic food, local ingredients are mandatory	4.88	5.39	5.41	5.25	5.68	5.30	5.32
Nobody knows better to prepare a traditional food than grandma	4.72	5.29	5.16	5.18	5.88	5.57	5.30
Traditional food has a unique production system	4.61	5.02	5.48	4.99	5.54	5.34	5.16
To have successful production of traditional food, food must be produced in the local area	4.46	5.20	5.23	4.15	4.92	5.37	4.89
My first association with traditional food is natural, organic	4.43	4.89	4.42	4.66	4.88	5.18	4.74
An authentic traditional food should have a story to tell	3.92	4.99	5.49	4.55	6.18	5.39	5.09
Traditional food is all about special moments and/or events	3.90	4.79	4.90	5.10	5.35	4.42	4.74
Average by cities	4.85	5.31	5.35	5.15	5.51	5.47	

foods. Additionally, the Valjevo region is known for its development of rural tourism, where learning to prepare traditional food is one of the key tourist activities. As stated by *Baltic et al.* (2018), events that are organized in Serbia, in which various rural associations participate, play a big role in tourism, which is important because in Serbian villages, people still consume a lot of traditional food and nurture the national cuisine in simple and complex ways.

For the statement *The quality of home-made food depends on the season*, respondents in all cities

had, on average, a positive attitude, which to some extent could be expected. Having in mind the role of food safety, but also the importance of sensory characteristics of traditional dishes, it is necessary to use fresh foods in order to maintain the quality of food. The reason that speaks in favour of this is that local food can be an obstacle in the development of tourism, since not all tourists appreciate foods that they find new or unusual. Unlike standard activities in destinations where tourists are generally more willing to try and experience things new

and different, consuming new and unfamiliar food causes fear in many (Perito *et al.*, 2020). Tourists can perceive new and different food as potentially dangerous for their health. The risk of food poisoning at the destination is one of the biggest problems and fears of tourists. The largest number of cases of foodborne disease among tourists is characteristic of Africa, followed by Central America, South America, the Caribbean, South and East Asia. The most common problems that tourists face are: diarrhoea, stomach complications and diseases, dermatological diseases, respiratory diseases, infectious diseases (Rosselló *et al.*, 2017). The risk for tourists, when it comes to foodborne disease, is often consumption of traditional food, i.e., food with which the tourist has never before come into contact (Kilibarda, 2019). Also, it is important to consider the statement *Traditional food has a unique production system*, which showed that only Belgrade residents have a neutral attitude regarding the way food is produced. This could be explained by the lifestyle in big cities and the eating patterns of people who “live fast”. The results of the current study indicate special attention should be paid to the application of food safety standards in the production of traditional cuisine, in order to reduce among tourists the perceived risk of consuming traditional food.

When it comes to local cuisine and the claim that “Grandma’s kitchen” is the best, the most positive attitudes, on average, were recorded for Subotica (5.79; 5.88) and Valjevo (5.77; 5.57), while Belgraders were neutral on this topic. The recorded results could be due to demographics – household structure, intergenerational connections and cultural characteristics of the place of residence. The data obtained for the statement *Traditional food is all about special moments and/or events*, where similar results were recorded, also support this. Namely, life in big cities is often characterized by greater alienation of people from each other, which is directly reflected in the experiences of tradition, family and traditional, shared meals.

Serbian cuisine is very heterogeneous; dynamic historical events have influenced the nutrition of the people and the formation of diet patterns, so each region has its own specifics and differences (Gagić *et al.*, 2014). Traditional food is one of the most interesting aspects of tourism and often leaves the strongest impression, which is also the reason for the return of many visitors. This speaks in favour of the fact that traditional food, among other things, must tell a story, i.e., contribute to the overall experience of tourists. On this issue and on average,

positive attitudes were reported only from Subotica, Valjevo and Nis.

Observing the answers from the different cities, it can be concluded that respondents from all cities had a positive attitude towards traditional food, except Belgrade, where a neutral attitude was recorded (average score 4.85), while the highest score was recorded in Subotica.

Bearing in mind that Belgrade is the capital and the most populous city in Serbia, and taking into account the modern way of life in big cities (“separation” from family, spending most of the day away from home, consuming fast food) and the dominance of global culture, the result is, to some extent, understandable. However, it is important to note in relation to global culture that, although globalization is expected to lead to increased homogenization, this is not the case when it comes to gastronomy and tourism. Globalization and the connection of different national cuisines are causing significant changes in traditional and local gastronomy. Although globalization is often seen as a threat to local gastronomic identity, it can also bring benefits to local gastronomy, because without global connectivity, some authentic dishes in individual countries and destinations would still be completely anonymous. Globalization can also encourage revitalization of some local gastronomic products. Also, globalization has contributed to the creation of so-called “glocal” gastronomic products. Glocalization is a combination of globalization and localization, which means that globalization is adapted to local conditions (Stano, 2018). This term is used today to denote the application or representation of some global socio-cultural phenomena in specific localities. Glocalization is the result of the relationships between the global and the local, and these relationships allow them to complement each other instead of competing. Examples of such products include pizza, pasta, sushi, curry, ice cream etc. (Brdar, 2015). Nonetheless, globalization and internationalization could diminish the authentic food market. Our duty is to keep working, improving, exploring and learning about new food and destinations, but at the same time to maintain the authenticity of traditional dishes and culture whenever possible. This is the only way to stay unique in today’s world where it is easy to forget important matters. Also, from the aspect of tourism development, Belgrade is dominated by business rather than leisure tourists. Additionally, nine gastronomic events are held annually in Belgrade, a special statistical region of Serbia that makes up 3.7% of the country’s territory (Kilibarda *et al.*, 2018b).

On the other hand, the current results for Subotica are not surprising, taking into account the demographic characteristics of this area, multiculturalism, the fact that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries the meat exporters Hartman & Konen were the first in the country to use refrigerators, and that agriculture is the second-largest employment sector in the area (16.93%) (*Local sustainable development strategy of the city of Subotica 2013 – 2022*, 2013). In addition, a large number of *salaš* farms and households that actively participate in bringing the traditional cuisine closer to tourists can be taken into account. The richness of the cuisine is characterized by the famous “wines from the sand”, fruit brandies, from the Bunjevac specialities, the most popular dish is *krompirača* (potatoes baked with fresh and blood sausages), and from Hungarian specialities, the most popular meal is veal perklet. Additionally, based on official data and announced events, a total of 29 events are held in the region of Vojvodina (in the area of Subotica, the most popular are those dedicated to wines and brandies – Palić Wine Festival, Berban Days and Young Brandy Festival) (*Kilibarda et al.*, 2018b), which further contributes to the possibility of connecting tourism and traditional food.

The tourist season in Serbia, in accordance with the circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic, caused a large number of domestic tourists to visit local destinations in 2020. For example, according to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2020), compared to August 2019, in August 2020, the number of domestic tourist arrivals increased by 25.3% while the number of foreign tourist arrivals decreased by 87.1%. Forced to spend their summer vacation in their own country, expectations were different, in relation to previously acquired experiences, i.e., requirements. The situation with COVID-19 was unexpected, but not impossible. In rural areas or tourist destinations, those involved in hospitality must always be ready to meet the expectations of demanding tourists. In this regard, traditional food, as part of the tourist offer and consumption, must be of uniform and high quality, and produced respecting and adhering to good hygienic practices that ensure the production of safe products. This can be achieved only through the cooperation of small producers, individual farms and local producers, with

support from local government and scientific and professional bodies, and finally central government. Such cooperation should improve gastronomic tourism, due to production of attractive traditional dishes that satisfy even the most demanding tourists in terms of quality in the broadest sense.

Conclusion

The gastronomic offer of a tourist destination is an important element of the tourist experience, because the taste of the food consumed during the trip is remembered for a long time and is something that tourists, if satisfied, will look for again. Traditional food production is a combination of unique elements of the natural environment, knowledge of the local community and historical and cultural resources that are synergistically connected and form the unique food character of the specific place. Traditionally prepared food is an important factor in choosing a destination for some tourists, but special emphasis should be placed on the quality of food, especially taking into account the safety aspects of food preparation and consumption. Despite the current study involving only small-scale research, the results obtained are informative and relevant for employees in tourism and hospitality, as well as for tourists. The characteristics of traditional food that the respondents considered the most important were: history of traditional dishes, that the quality of traditional food depends on the season, and that such food is high quality and safe, healthy and authentic, with specific sensory characteristics. It is recommended the quality and protection of the authenticity of traditional food is improved through the use of safe food ingredients, is produced by local producers, and is prepared in a safe way. In order to maintain cuisine customs along with traditional dishes and promote a destination, those involved in today's competitive tourism market should connect and work closely together. A limitation of this study is the small number of respondents, but this research could be a starting point for researching other factors that could influence the attitudes of tourists when it comes to traditional food in a destination. The obtained results will definitely help create an adequate tourist offer, but they can also help the development of local food production practices.

Značaj tradicionalne kvalitete hrane — gledište turizma

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Apstrakt: Ovaj članak daje pristup odnosu gastronomije i turizma, sa posebnim naglaskom na kvalitetu tradicionalne hrane. Poslednjih godina, kada je svet postao „globalno selo“, a ljudi širom sveta imaju pristup Internetu, oduševljeni turisti i privrednici lako mogu dobiti informacije o različitim destinacijama, pomažući tako rastu globalizacije i turističke industrije. Ovaj članak objašnjava u kojoj su meri gastronomija i tradicionalna hrana relevantni za razvoj turizma i zašto je presudno posetiocima i turistima ponuditi jedinstvena, tradicionalna jela visokog kvaliteta. Za proučavanje slučaja u Republici Srbiji razmatrani su veći gradovi. Dodatno, članak naglašava važnost tradicionalne hrane u stvaranju sveukupnog, nezaboravnog turističkog iskustva, s obzirom na to da su tradicija, kultura i hrana snažno utisnuti u identitet svake zemlje.

Cljučne reči: gastronomija, tradicionalna hrana, turističko iskustvo, kulturni identitet.

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