**CULTURE AND FOOD**

**DETERMINING THE VALUE OF FOOD IN RURAL TOURISM AS AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE TOTAL TOURISM EXPERIENCE**

**Introduction**

Food has always been an integral part of every culture. From the beginning of man food was always his main occupation. That is understandable because without food people can not survive. Even the preparing of food was and still is an important part of living. At the beginning just adding by some herbs, the first men were changing the food’s taste. Later on, with the discovering of fire, they discovered totally new tastes by thermal treatment of food. Until today people have always been on the search for enriching tastes, discovering something new and experimenting with food.

The modern style of living influenced the way people consume food. People stay more and more at work and have less time to be at home to cook their own meals. That is why people tend to eat in restaurants or on the go. Food has become a very important part of tourism, and recently we can speak of developing gastronomic tourism, or touristic products. Local (traditional) specialties have almost disappeared from their lives. Therefore, people are in pursuit of trying traditional food from its culture, or from other foreign cultures. Traditional food is regarded to be an important feature of a particular culture. Because of the globalization, there is a larger need for specific dishes, prepared in a safe manner, and consisting of healthy ingredients. Tradition itself is way of continuing and transferring of diverse components of any culture to the following generations. Thus, the culture will be partially preserved, although many influences between other cultures happen constantly. Tradition is a positive feature of social and cultural life. Tradition is a very broad category consisting of tangible and intangible values, such as norms, beliefs, characteristics, objects, creations and so on. Besides traditional food there also exist diverse traditional ways of consuming food, traditional spices, traditional preparing and cooking etc. Traditional food is something more general of national food. National food is specific food characteristic for different nations or countries, through which they can be identified by foreigners.[[1]](#footnote-2)

Today mostly the traditional food is usually regarded as an important part of peoples’ culture. But the same can be said for the so called modern or contemporary food. Food has always been changing within individual cultures as well as between different ones. Modern food is a reflection of modern living and interaction of almost all the people today. Therefore it can be said that there does not exist unchanged food which is characteristic for only one culture. The globalization process influenced completely almost all cultures in the world as well as the different cultures’ food. Even the so called fast food or junk food phenomena arose from these globalization processes. On one hand globalization has caused diversification of food in the world or transferring of traditional food in countries abroad. On the other hand globalization is usually regarded as a negative phenomenon because it influenced the total food industry in a way that the same food is used in different countries by different cultures. This usually can have a negative impact on the local traditional food and the disappearance of cultural characteristics, such as the own domestic food.

One of the largest phenomena in the last decades in the world was the unseen increase of tourism demand. It can be said that food goes hand in hand with tourism itself. Food is not only satisfying the basic needs of people, to diminish hunger. Food can be a very attractive component of the tourism supply and diverse tourism offer in certain places. People always want to experience the local culture of the country or place where they are travelling. This can be achieved through trying the local food. Moreover traditional food can be a very attractive component of tourism supply; there are even certain types of tourism (wine tourism, gastronomic tourism) or specific target markets are interested mainly in trying traditional specialties.

Traditional food became very attractive among tourists in the world. There are several factors which influences this process.

- Consumers spend a higher proportion of their income on prepared food, gourmet products, eating out and food items which are characterized by some form of health or ethical benefits. This means that they have traded up some food products or meals that were avoided before, and some of the everyday products have traded down.

- An ageing population and changing life styles have driven demand for increased eating out and food tourism opportunities.

- An increase of people who are rejecting the globalization processes. They have gotten fed up with the same tastes over and over again in their environment, but also abroad, and now want to try something new

- Multiculturalism has become an everyday concept in the daily life of the consumer, driven by immigration, globalization, the internet, the expansion in specialist and minority TV channels and the relentless growth in international tourism. What were once exotic foods have become foods of first choice

- The emergence of diverse niche food programs, TV channels and magazines have all contributed to this. Many food celebrities and experts of preparing food have been created who exceed their educational and informational role. The celebrity chefs shape modern tourism products related to consuming food.

**Defining gastronomic tourism**

Gastronomy has developed in the last two centuries into a scientific field of studying food, its characteristics, preparing and consuming. The name “gastronomy” derives from the ancient Greek language and literally means “right way of eating”. Often gastronomy is regarded more than just a scientific field. It is considered to be an art, skill that can be learned, as well as gained knowledge, with the aim to find the right ways and methods for meeting people’s needs of nutrition. As mentioned before, culture and social development influenced the way people prepare and consume their food. Therefore the changes of civilization affected the field of gastronomy. Because gastronomy causes implications for the economy of a region, or country, it is evident that gastronomy also influences tourism. Food is one of the important factors which can affect the total satisfaction of tourists during their stay. It is the basis of Hotel and Catering businesses.

In order to identify the role of gastronomy in tourism, the role of food in tourism has to be identified. Tourism means travel ant stay by tourists in a place away from home. Tourists can stay for a shorter period of time (less than one day as an excursion), or for a longer time period (couple of days, even months). Therefore if tourists stay away from home they need to eat which is a basic biological need. So, the role of food is obvious – it is essential and unavoidable during the tourists’ stay. While the role of food during the tourists’ stay is obvious and simple, gastronomy has a more important influence, and its’ role is more difficult to identify. Seeing gastronomy as science that studies the relationships between food and culture (not just cooking), that includes social, cultural, religious, biological and other aspects of food, it becomes even more complicated to locate the role of gastronomy in tourism.

If we start from the connection that gastronomy makes between food and culture, than we can say that gastronomy is an important part of the cultural tourism. The (inter)national food of other countries may play great role when offering cultural tours to the tourists.[[2]](#footnote-3) That is because their wish is not only to find out about the history, cultural heritage and so on of the visiting country, but also the national food of that country in its pure origin. This means that traditional meals cooked the traditional way (as part of gastronomy) are very important in cultural tourism. Furthermore, gastronomy or more precisely, traditional food is a central element of nature based types of tourism. Such a tourism type is rural tourism. In order to experience the local ambience, local lifestyle and unspoiled nature, tourists want to taste the food of the locals.

During holidays the gastronomic factor causes some changes in the way people are eating[[3]](#footnote-4). Some of these changes are as follows:

* the gastronomic factor (preparation of food, type of food, the groceries used, combination of ingredients etc.) influences the choice of accommodation (type and categorization)
* people are more ready to experiment with taste and try new food
* tourists eat food they usually prohibit themselves to eat at home
* the time of the day and frequency of meal changes
* people enjoy food and eating more than at home

We can conclude that gastronomy plays a very important role in tourism and sometimes it can be the primary motive of the tourists.

The International Culinary Tourism Association defines gastronomic tourism as “the pursuit of unique and memorable eating and drinking experiences”.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Eating local food and drinking local wine gives diners the sense that they are truly in a different culture. The physical beauty of a place, the authenticity of the surroundings and the presentation of the food, are among the primary ingredients of gastronomic tourism.[[5]](#footnote-6)

What visitors want out of their food experience varies. As visitors become more adventurous, many are looking for something genuine and authentic, which they believe can be found in local foods and eating areas.

There is a trend towards standardization and homogenization; tourists wary of unfamiliar environments where both the food and clientele are foreign, prefer to frequent establishments they are familiar with. This has been one of the drivers in the spread of fast food chains.

Gastronomic experiences play a part in determining perceptions of and satisfaction with the overall travel experience and food is agreed to impinge on tourist attitudes, decisions and behavior.

Food and wine can be a very powerful influence on feelings of involvement and place attachment and poor quality and service failure can impact negatively on health, disrupting trips and tarnishing destination reputations.[[6]](#footnote-7)

The gastronomic tourism experience does not necessarily only involve the time spent at a location. The role of food in the total tourism process forms in all the travel steps (informing, pre-visit, travel, actual stay, post-visit).

**Gastronomic tourists**

When thinking about the gastronomic tourist, the desire to experience a particular type of food or product of a specific region or the desire to taste the dish of a particular chef must be the major motivation for traveling. In other words, food is the primary factor in influencing travel behavior decision making.[[7]](#footnote-8)

There is a wide range of ways that tourists interact with food, tourists that are more serious can participate in organized activities like sampling and learning about food. This interest, often labeled as culinary tourism, gastronomy tourism, or tasting tourism, also incorporates that appreciation of beverages, both of the alcohol and non-alcoholic nature. On the other end of the spectrum are tourists with a casual attitude towards food; however, even these people need to decide upon what and where to eat when they are traveling. In the middle are those who enjoy dining out and trying local cuisine when traveling for leisure or business. Others enjoy watching the scenes at local markets or sampling and purchasing produce linked to the destination. A visitor’s gastronomic experiences at their destination can also change their consumption patterns when they return home due to the exposure of previously unknown ingredients and cooking methods.[[8]](#footnote-9)

However, it is important to remember that not everyone is a food tourist. The committed gastronomic tourists are only a very small segment, and the non-gastronomically focused tourists interested in trying new foods are also an important and relevant segment. In fact, the non-gastronomically focused tourist is a larger segment that is economically significant because of its size. Therefore the specific target market of gastronomy tourism is very narrow. Their main motivation is visiting places because of their characteristic food. It can be said that these people put more value on meals, than ordinary tourists. In a broader sense, almost all tourists are part of the gastronomic experience. Tourists need to eat during their stay, regardless of their primary motivation for tourism activities. But all tourists value quality food and service. Food can play a central role in some tourism types, like rural tourism and wine tourism. In both cases, whether tourists are involved in food related tourism activities or other tourist activities, food is a dominant element of the total tourism experience.

Gastronomic tourists can be divided into several groups. According to the prevalence of their motivation to visit a destination because of the local food, there exist several types of gastronomic tourists:

- the group that primarily travel to destinations in order to try local food. They are also called food tourists;

- tourists that regard food as an important part of the enjoyment during their stay, but it is not the sole and primary motivation for visiting a destination. They are often called interested tourists;

- the group that believe quality and traditional food will contribute to their experience. They are called the unreached;

- the group of tourists that don’t perceive food as an important part of their experience, but they don’t have a negative attitude towards it. They are the so called unengaged;

- the unwanted group for gastronomic tourism consists of tourists that do not show any interest in the local food, and they don’t care what food they will consume during their stay (non-gastronomic tourists).

Gastronomic tourists can be classified into other groups, according to the level of interest and involvement in local food during their stay in a destination.[[9]](#footnote-10) They can have:

- High interest and emphasized involvement;

- Moderate to high interest and involvement;

- Moderate to low interest and low involvement;

- Low interest and low involvement.

From the above said it can be concluded that almost all classifications of gastronomic tourists have something in common. That is the level of interest in motivation. The level of motivation for determining the importance of food in rural tourism will be discussed in this paper.

**Determining the importance and potential of local food in rural tourism**

As mentioned before, local food can play a dominant role in several tourism types besides the specialized gastronomic tourism. These are wine tourism and rural tourism which emphasize the importance of food in the total tourism experience.

Tourists, whether they are engaged in food related tourism types or not, are in the constant search of quality and consistency of services. This however, poses some problems in maintaining authenticity of local food. The increase of quality and consistency must be balanced with authenticity.

Contemporary trends in tourism impose involvement of tourists in alternate tourism activities, visiting of unexplored destinations and maintaining high quality of products and services. Such a tourism type is rural tourism. More and more tourists travel to destinations where rural tourism is being primarily developed.

Therefore, local products and services, such as local food need to have high and consistent quality. But also, the destination in total has to be evaluated if we want to develop rural tourism on its territory. For example, we can offer the best food, but no tourists will ever try it, because we attracted the wrong target market. Consequently, the potentials of the complete destination have to be determined. The creators of tourism strategies must have the know-how for determining the potentials, values and importance of the local tourism product.[[10]](#footnote-11) This can be achieved through evaluating several elements related to the development of the tourism destination. These elements must be examined through undertaking desk research (quantitative data) and field research (qualitative data). The elements that need to be evaluated are the following:

- analysis of local touristic supply;

- analysis of touristic demand;

- analysis of competition;

- analysis of market trends.

The greatest attention should be put on the internal factors because stakeholders of the destination can take several measures for change, according to the current needs. Such an internal factor is the tourism supply. Of course the content and quality of tourism supply has to be in accordance with the external factors. These external factors are touristic demand, competition and market trends. The external factors are outside the reach of actions and taking measures for direct change. Stakeholders must constantly monitor changes in the external factors in order adequately to adapt to them. Only in this way there is a chance to succeed on the tourism market.

This is the reason for elaborating primarily the touristic demand of rural tourism in this paper. The analysis of local touristic supply must first of all include a detailed inventory of several elements important to rural tourism. These are:

- natural factors;

- socio-economic factors;

- current condition of tourism infrastructure and available services;

- cultural factors;

- sport and recreational possibilities;

- quality and quantity of accommodation facilities;

- quality and quantity of catering services.

After determining the detailed inventory of all the factors included in the destination, they must also be sorted according to their importance for rural tourism development. There are many methods and techniques for doing this. One of the best and most frequently used methodologies is the so called FAS-methodology which is developed and implemented by the UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization).

The resources and elements of touristic supply need to be sorted according to their importance for a particular type of tourism. In this case it is rural tourism and specifically the role of food in its development. According to this methodology, the resources of touristic supply are classified into:

- **Factors** – all the resources present in the tourism destination that have the potential to attract tourists but are not used in practice;

- **Attractors** – touristic attractions, localities and capacities that attract tourists and are already known to tourists. They don’t need to be further promoted because they are already successfully implemented in tourism development of the destination;

- **Support services** – all elements that act as supporting factors of the actions taken for creating and development of the attractors.

Therefore the FAS-methodology derives from the above mentioned classification (factors, attractors, support services, or FAS). The best way for determining the elements of this methodology and the classification of resources in the correct groups is discussion and agreement of several experts from different domains. Only then we will evaluate the realistic situation of the tourism destination.

It is important to mention that the resources that fall within a certain group can shift towards another group. Of course it is preferable the values to shift towards the Attractors. But in reality, resources often shift towards a lower level of group and importance (Factors and Supply services). It depends in which phase the life cycle of the current touristic product is.

This methodology can be implemented for rural tourism development of a destination. As mentioned before food can be a very important tool for this. The local (traditional) food can represent a more or less important resource. Depending on how tourists perceive food and how much they are actually involved in consuming local food, it can be regarded as a Factor, Attractor or Supply service.

- Food as Factor in rural tourism can be regarded if the destination is still unexplored by a larger amount of tourists. Furthermore, the particular target market can be only loosely be interested in consuming local and traditional specialties. In order the local food to be regarded as an Attractor the quality and authenticity should be improved. Also the food must be promoted more intensively to potential or current tourists that do not have enough information for the potential of local food.

- Food as Attractor in rural tourism can be regarded in a destination which is already recognizable for its characteristic food. Furthermore, destinations which developed rural tourism including elements of wine tourism and gastronomic tourism, and which are specialized mainly in these types of services are evaluated as destinations with important attractors. A local dish that is famous in the world represents an Attractor in rural tourism of a particular destination. Tourism supply must improve the quality and include innovations in the improvement of food, in order to retain the attractors. A specialized and narrow target market that is visiting the destination can define more attractions than ordinary tourists. The characteristic food products of a destination can be promoted as Unique Selling Points (USP) with complementary dishes, or tourism activities and services.

- Food as Supply Service in rural tourism can be regarded all types of food that can’t be evaluated as recognizable national dishes. Actually food represents a supply service in tourism types that are not directly specialized in providing food related products and services. This also depends on the perspective of tourists. For some tourists a certain local dish can be the main reason for travelling in the particular area, while others don’t regard local food as the main motivator for visiting. In contemporary tourism (mainly mass tourism) food is a support service. The reason for this is the fact that all tourists have to eat. Therefore food represents a resource for satisfying the basic needs of tourists. Only some specialized niche tourism types that are closely related to food regard it as an Attractor, or a dominant motivator for tourists’ visits. As mentioned before, rural tourism puts a high value on local food, because rural tourists want to have a complete experience of the locals and their way of life. This can’t be said for all types of food, but only for recognizable local dishes.

Several research studies in the past few years determined that Macedonia has a high potential for development of rural tourism. Another reason for this conclusion is the fact that Macedonia has many interesting and quality dishes that are becoming more and more recognizable.

Macedonia has a very old history and culture, dating back to the ancient times till the 8th century BC. It can be concluded that also traditional food and dishes started very early on this territory. It is understood that the modern dishes today have almost nothing in common with the dishes from that time period. Bread is maybe the dominant food stuff that is still used today, which is consumed with almost any other dish. The moderate continental climate with sub-mediterranean influences makes it possible to cultivate different fruits and vegetables on this territory. They are almost consumed directly from the garden, or they are very fresh and tasty. Therefore they represent a unique selling point in tourism supply and the country is becoming recognizable for its fresh food. Wine is also a part of Macedonian culture since ancient times. There is the large Tikves region where the most quality wine is being produced and which is being exported in many countries abroad. Similar characteristics have the Macedonian honey, and the local red pepper, because the nature is generally unspoiled and very quality products are being produced.

Macedonia has many food and meals considered to be traditional and national. Some of them are: gravche-tavche, ajvar, gjomleze, bakrdan, nafora, palenta, shirden, sarma, musaka, burek, gevrek, zelnik and komad, Ohrid trout, eel cooked in Struga, zolenik, different types of “mandza”, pindzur, makalo, garlic paste, shopska and Macedonian salad, pastrmajlia, janija, chkembe chorba, baked spinach, malidzano, mekici, tigajnci, pacha, stuffed peppers, selsko meso, rakija, wine and so on. The majority of them has high value and importance for rural tourism and can be regarded as Attractors. In the future, the creators of tourism policies must improve the recognition by tourists. This is already being done in promotion activities where tourists and tourism partners are given Macedonian dishes to try. Also the standard promotion emphasizes fresh and tasty food in Macedonia, which should be an important reason for visiting this destination.

**Conclusion**

Food has always been an important and integral part of every culture. From a basic need for surviving it developed into a resource to satisfy specific needs. Contemporary influences of different internal and external factors contributed to changes in food and the way people eat. Modern tourism influenced the tourists’ needs for tasting national, local and traditional food of other cultures.

Gastronomic tourism has become a separate tourism type. Therefore food does not mean not only satisfying the basic needs of tourists, but also enriching their total experiences and it has become the dominant factor for tourists to travel to a specific place. Gastronomy tourism ad its experience can be regarded as a separate scientific field that examines food, but also preparing, presentation and consuming of food. It can also be regarded as a specific skill or particular knowledge about these elements of food. The globalization process has encountered resentment by many people because it influenced food in different parts of the world to become homogenous.

Gastronomic tourists are a specific target market who expresses different levels of importance of food and involvement in consuming food. These types of tourists can be classified into several different groups that have something in common. That is the motivation to visit a certain place and to try local specialties in order to experience totally the local culture.

Tourism types that are closely related to food and consuming of food are specific niche types. Such a tourism type where food has the dominant role is rural tourism. It is evident that the value and importance of food in rural tourism has to be determined. The attractiveness of a destination is also very important for rural tourism development. Several elements should be analyzed, such as touristic supply; touristic demand; competition; as well as market trends. Emphasis should be put on touristic supply because tourism policy makers can directly influence and change it. An important method for determining the importance of resources (local food) in rural tourism development is the FAS-methodology created and implemented by UNWTO. Most important resources are Attractors. Macedonia has many characteristic and recognizable dishes that can be regarded as Attractors. Improvement of quality and promotion will contribute to their further development and rural tourism growth.

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