



Barriers to the Development of Tourism Product Based on Authentic Gastronomy in Rural Areas

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Abstract: *Food tourism in rural areas can be considered a sustainable source of benefits for the local community, but only if it is developed in line with the potentials, interests and capacities of respective host community. Authentic gastronomy of rural areas is considered highly desirable by tourism demand, but there are some barriers to its development that need to be taken into account. This paper is conceptually examining the main challenges of establishing efficient local food networks in rural areas, for the purpose of the development of authentic gastronomy tourism offer. Barriers, identified from the analysis of scientific literature, are elaborated and discussed within the framework of rural areas. Findings, apart from general challenges of tourism development in rural areas, specially emphasise the importance of careful alignment of interests and expectations of all direct and indirect stakeholders in the process of development of authentic gastronomy in rural areas.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural food tourism is a potentially sustainable source of local community benefits and a year-round tourism product (Hjalager & Johansen, 2013; Dougherty et al., 2013). The “total rural tourism experience” is highly sought after by visitors (Kastenholtz et al., 2012) because when tourists sample local gastronomy, they learn about the local culture, and emotional bonds can be formed through these gastronomic experiences (Bjork et al., 2016, Stone, et al., 2017). Nowadays, tourists expect uniqueness in their destinations, and food identity can be used to market and promote a region as a culinary tourism destination by conveying the taste of a place (Bonow and Rytkönen, 2012). In addition to improving the quality of the tourism experience, locally produced and processed food can support the local economy and be an important tool for its diversification (Yi-Chin et al., 2011).

The main topic of this paper is the development of gastronomy tourism in rural areas. As discussed by many scholars and practitioners, traditional and authentic food tourism in rural areas has significant potential to contribute to the regeneration of the respective areas and provide benefits to all stakeholders involved and the local community in general (Rahman et al., 2018; Okumus et al., 2018).

Tourists and visitors value the opportunity to taste authentic local food and experience this part of local culture, history, and daily life (Madaleno et al., 2018). However, providing quality authentic local food in rural areas is not a simple task, but a complex one, especially in terms of organising and establishing efficient and effective collaboration among all relevant stakeholders, e.g., local farmers, restaurateurs, owners/managers of lodging establishments, owners of

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local food/souvenir stores, and local tourism organisations (Dougherty et al., 2013). The large share of national and international dishes, even in regions with significant culinary tradition and availability of local ingredients, is often the result of a non-systemic approach to more successful use of food resources in the active tourism development function (Kalenjuk et al., 2015; Santos et al., 2020).

Therefore, it is important to understand the barriers and obstacles that prevent rural tourism destinations from properly developing their culinary and gastronomic potential. The main purpose of this paper is therefore to identify, conceptualise, and discuss the main challenges in developing an authentic gastronomic tourism offer in rural areas, with a particular focus on issues related to the establishment of efficient local food networks.

2. IDENTIFICATION AND ANALYSIS OF MOST PROMINENT CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS IN DEVELOPING AUTHENTIC GASTRONOMY OFFER IN RURAL AREAS

This paper is conceptual in nature, and the starting point for the analysis to achieve the set objective was the study of available academic literature and case studies dealing with local gastronomy in rural areas. Google scholar was used as the main search engine and numerous papers were found after an initial review. In order to reduce their number and to allow a focus on the chosen topic, several criteria were selected:

- the date of publication (only papers from 2002 to the present were considered),
- the explicit focus on gastronomy (in the title or in the keywords of the paper),
- direct or indirect mention of barriers, challenges, or obstacles to the creation and development of gastronomic offerings.

The rural dimension was important in screening obtained works but was not considered an essential criterion. Likely, some (possibly important) papers were not included due to the large number of papers found and also due to Google scholar limitations. However, this paper is not intended to be a precise bibliographic analysis, but rather a conceptual overview and general classification of barriers and obstacles related to the development of authentic gastronomy in rural areas.

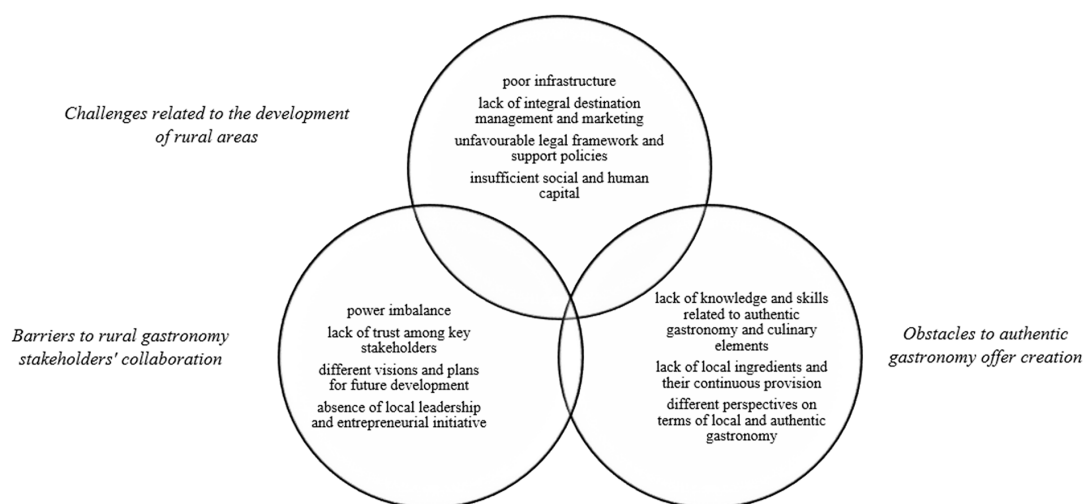


Figure 1. Identified barriers to the development of authentic gastronomy tourism offer in rural areas

Source: Authors' elaboration

After careful analysis of the literature and papers available online, three critical groups of barriers/challenges/obstacles were identified. As can be seen in Figure 1, these groups relate to broader issues that rural areas face in developing tourism, such as lack of quality infrastructure, destination management, and marketing issues (Dougherty et al., 2013)

As pointed out in several papers (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Kastenholtz et al., 2012), many rural areas are not properly recognised and supported by regional and national regulatory frameworks and policies to facilitate development and attract new entrepreneurial initiatives and investments in tourism (including gastronomy tourism).

The second group of obstacles focuses more on the specific characteristics of gastronomy and its authentic and local elements. In these segments, many hospitality and catering establishments that want to offer these types of products struggle with the general lack of sufficient quantities of local ingredients for traditional recipes, their price, and in some cases, lack of skills in preparing authentic gastronomy dishes (Sims, 2010, Jørstad et al., 2020). In addition, supply representatives often disagree on what constitutes local and authentic gastronomy, especially in terms of cultural dimension and geographical proximity (Stalmirska, 2021).

Finally, the third (and perhaps most important) set of obstacles relates to the lack of coordination and cooperation among the various actors involved in local gastronomy. These actors include local farmers, restaurant owners, DMOs, and also civil society organisations that protect and showcase local culture and tradition (Hjalager & Johansen, 2013). Although not explicitly mentioned among the main obstacles, insufficiently developed collaboration among key stakeholders, especially rural entrepreneurs and policy makers, also negatively affects the marketing of specialty foods and rural regions to the postmodern consumer (Sidali et al., 2013).

Alignment of interests among all of the aforementioned groups usually occurs in the organisation and execution of gastronomy events, but aside from that, there is often a lack of ongoing collaboration in providing processes that ensure the success of authentic gastronomy product (Veeck et al, 2006, Bonow and Rytönen, 2012; Dougherty et al, 2013). When it comes to linking agriculture and tourism providers in rural areas, one of the most important chains is the one between farmers and accommodation providers. It is this supply chain that suffers from various problems leading to economic leakage due to high food imports, and this problem is difficult to solve without external support (e.g., policies to help hotels buy local food) or a strong awareness of the importance of the geographical proximity of food offered to tourists in rural areas as part of their experience (François et al., 2017). Here, we see that building efficient food networks is particularly difficult when actors are more focused on personal economic gain than on supporting the local community and creating long-term benefits and value (Boesen et al., 2017). Finally, an efficient and successful authentic gastronomic tourism product requires local community engagement and active support, either by attending and volunteering at gastronomic events (Kumer et al., 2019) or by promoting positive “word of mouth” about specific high-quality local food providers (Kastenholtz et al., 2012).

3. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This work has raised more questions than it has answered, so there are many future lines of research: from conducting primary research in different rural destinations, to comparing gastronomic tourism products, their level of authenticity, and the challenges of implementation and future

development. More qualitative in-depth studies focusing exclusively on the creation of networks and collaboration among different stakeholders in destinations are also necessary. Although questionnaires and interviews are the most common and appropriate method to collect relevant data, it is possible to take a slightly different approach and use secondary data on the number of visitors to gastronomic establishments in rural destinations and their spending on different food products to further objectively assess and analyse the importance of an authentic gastronomic offer.

4. CONCLUSION

The importance of local gastronomy to the development of rural areas is not a new topic, and most scholars and practitioners agree that culinary tourism is an emerging industry in rural areas, providing new jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities.

However, the fact that there are many more potentially great rural gastronomic destinations than examples of good practice suggests that there are very significant challenges and barriers preventing rural destinations from developing an (authentic) gastronomic offering more effectively.

This paper offers some practical insights into this complex issue. Among the identified and presented obstacles, which are divided into three categories, stakeholder collaboration is most emphasised as a critical element for creating sustainable, attractive and well-presented authentic gastronomy products in rural areas. More attention should be paid to efficient and effective collaboration among all relevant local stakeholders in providing unique and high-quality local food experiences in academic research as well as in the creation of practical support measures at the local and regional levels.

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