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Culinary Tourism. A New Trend on the Tourism Market

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Seen as a new form of manifestation of the behavior of the consumer of tourism products and services, culinary tourism has recorded an ascending trending the last years, with a positive forecast for the following years. A possible explanation for this phenomenon is the orientation and encouragement of the tourist services providers to adopt regional development strategies that harness traditional local resources and products in a context where the contemporary consumer no longer only pursues the acquisition of products and services to meet their needs, but also looks forward to new experiences that are a delight for the senses. Against this background, the present paper aims to highlight some of the characteristics of culinary tourism and to customize some of the dimensions of consumer behavior oriented towards this form of tourism, in an economy where the tertiary sector, and specifically the tourism sector, play a leading role both in Europe and worldwide.

Keywords: food tourism, sustainable regional development, consumer behavior, regional brand, culinary tourism, gastronomic tourism

JEL Classification: L83, M31

1. Introduction

Although the past two years have been shadowed by a series of terrorist attacks produced in Europe and beyond, in countries with an impressive touristic visit card (France, Italy, Germany, Spain etc.), an overview of the European tourist market shows that, although worried and concerned about personal safety and security, tourist customers have not given up travel. The data collected by the end of 2016, show a 2% increase in the number of accommodation nights as compared to the year 2015. (www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat)

Practically, at the level of the European Union, almost all member states have recorded an increase in the number of nights of accommodation requested by non-residents, the only notable exception being France, which recorded a decrease of 8,7% in the indicator above. However, France occupies the fourth place in the top European countries with the highest number of accommodation nights requested by non-residents (Fig.1).

As far as Romania is concerned, the number of accommodation nights requested by foreign tourists was 4.9 million in 2016, which signifies an increase of 8.9% as compared to the end of 2015. Furthermore, in what regards the number of nights required by residents, the dynamics of the indicator for the period 2016/2015 shows an increase of 8.4% (Eurostat, 2017).

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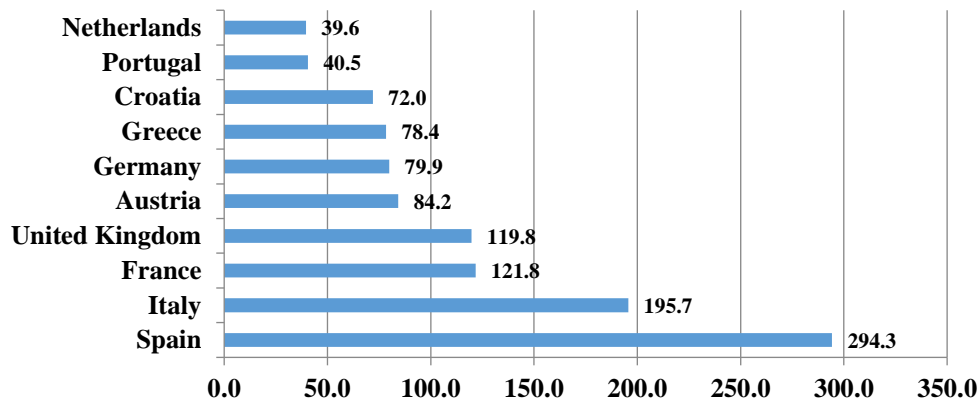


Figure 1. Top 10 of the European countries that have recorded the biggest number of accommodation nights requested by non-residents in 2016 (millions)

Source: Eurostat, 2017

Worldwide, the studies published by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) for January-April 2017 reflect an increasing trend in international tourist arrivals, with the value of the indicator increasing by 6.2% as compared to the same period of the previous year (UNWTO 2012, 2017a, 2017b).

From the analysis of the data regarding international touristic arrivals by regions, it can be noticed that the destinations negatively affected by the terrorist incidents which occurred last year have rapidly revitalized, while the ones that were on an ascending trend have maintained their evolution (Fig.2).

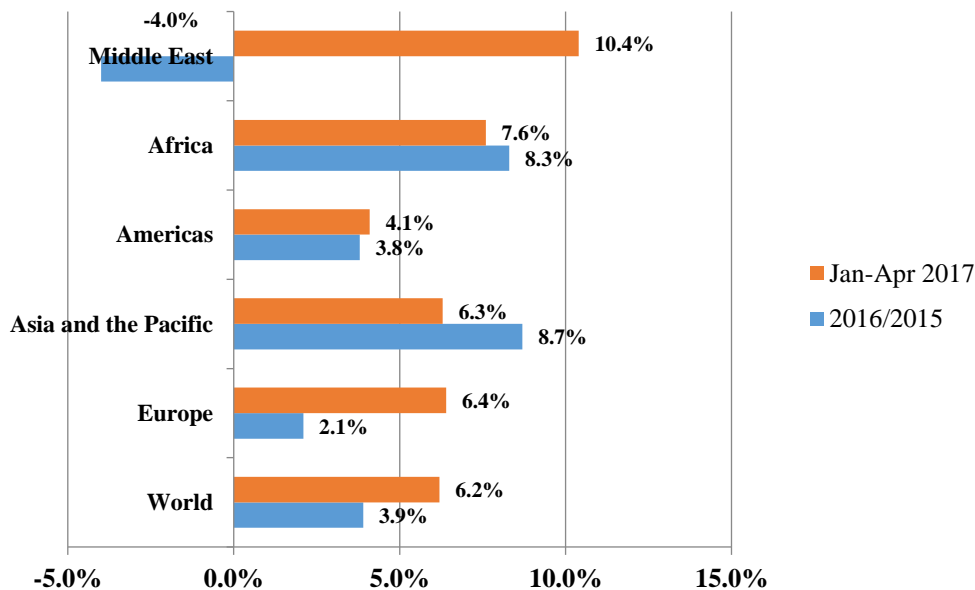


Figure 2. International Tourist Arrivals by Region (percentage change over same period of the previous year)

Source: UNWTO, 2017b, p.3

Practically, the success of a tourist region (destination) can be assessed according to a series of indicators, knowing that tourists consume the “product” of a destination and, consequently, this product must be what consumers expect and want.

In the overall picture of tourism products and services offered to the market, the orientation of consumer demand towards a new form of tourism, namely that of culinary tourism, as an expression of the culture / subcultures of a tourist region, is increasingly evident. Thus, the most attractive regions for food travelers are Europe (especially Spain, France and Italy) and Asia (especially Japan, India and Thailand). (Aboutourism.wordpress.com, 2010)

It is also extremely relevant that the Mediterranean diet of Spain, Greece, Italy and Morocco was included in UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in November 2010 (UNWTO, 2012), highlighting once again that culinary tourism contributes to the preservation of the cultural heritage of a region, being one of the factors and promoters of a regional brand.

2. The Particularities of Culinary Tourism

Although food has always been perceived as an integral part of the experience of the consumer of tourist services, only in recent years have gastronomy and the gastronomy-tourism relationship become a subject of study for specialists. Whether addressing the issue of consumption experience or consuming an experience for the tourist services consumer, the role of gastronomy in the orientation and fidelity of tourism demand is increasingly evident.

According to the opinions expressed by Bessiere (1998) and Cusack (2000), the way ingredients are combined and prepared is a means of expressing the cultural identity of a nation. Continuing this reasoning, it can even be said that local and regional gastronomy are attributes that add value to a tourist destination (Telfer and Wall, 1996), basically contributing to achieving a competitive advantage expressed by the increase of the sustainability of the tourist destination (Hall, 2002).

In the approach of the World FoodTravel Association, culinary tourism (food tourism) can be defined as “the pursuit and enjoyment of unique and memorable food and drink experiences, both far and near”, understanding that the food traveler can travel both in the region (World Food Travel, 2017), as well as in other regions or countries in search of unique culinary experiences.

In defining the scope of culinary tourism, it is extremely important to understand the differences between the culinary tourist as part of the tourist experience and the tourists who guide their decisions about the tourist destinations according to their interest in food. As a result, food tourism can be defined as “visiting the primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food tasting and / or experiencing the attributes of the specialized food production region are the primary motivating factor for travel” (Hall and Mitchell, 2001).

Whether discussing gourmet, gastronomic, culinary or rural tourism, the interest of the food consumer is present, but it can be the main reason for the travel or it can be subordinated to other interests (Table 1).

Table 1. *The role of food as a motivational factor for tourists' decisions*

Type of tourism	Interest for food	Number of tourists
Gourmet tourism/ Gastronomic tourism	<i>High interest:</i> e.g. travelling to a destination with the primary motive being to visit a specific restaurant, market or winery. All or nearly all tourist activities are food related.	Relatively low
Culinary tourism	<i>Moderate interest:</i> e.g. visiting a local market, festival, restaurant or winery once you have arrived at a destination as part of a wider range of lifestyle activities.	Average
Rural/Urban tourism	<i>Low interest:</i> e.g. visiting a local market, food festival, winery or restaurant because it is "something different".	Relatively high
Other forms of tourism	<i>Low or no interest:</i> e.g. visiting a familiar restaurant while you are travelling because you have to eat.	High

Source: interpretation of *Food tourism as special interest tourism* (Hall and Sharples, 2003)

Quite frequently in the specialized literature, the concept of food tourism is related to wine tourism, and it is estimated that the food, wine and tourism industry have to be approached from the perspective of their interdependence, as they lead to the creation and improvement of the image of a regional brand, while being a means of promoting and differentiating a region, and adding value to the tourist destination (Hall, 2002).

Considered as an intangible resource of a region's cultural heritage, the gastronomic heritage is seen as the source for providing high-quality and authentic products that contribute to the promotion and economic development of a region, bring about new opportunities to expand the business, and benefit not only the individual consumer, but also the community as a whole.

Essentially, at the level of a regional entity, the benefits offered by food tourism can be synthesized as follows (UNWTO, 2017a):

- foster inclusive and sustainable economic growth;
- social inclusiveness;
- employment and poverty reduction;
- resource efficiency;
- cultural values;
- diversity and heritage.

An overview of the culinary tourism market reveals that, at the level of 2016, 24.6% of the tourism service providers which formed the sample of respondents in a study conducted under the aegis of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) declared that they has set up a special budget to attract food tourists.

Generally speaking, the main events created by providers to attract food tourists aim at creating programs that provide consumers with unique experiences that cannot be experienced in business or leisure trips and are mainly focused on: cooking classes, visiting farmers markets, gourmet food shopping, attending winery tours, and attending wine festivals (Fig.3).

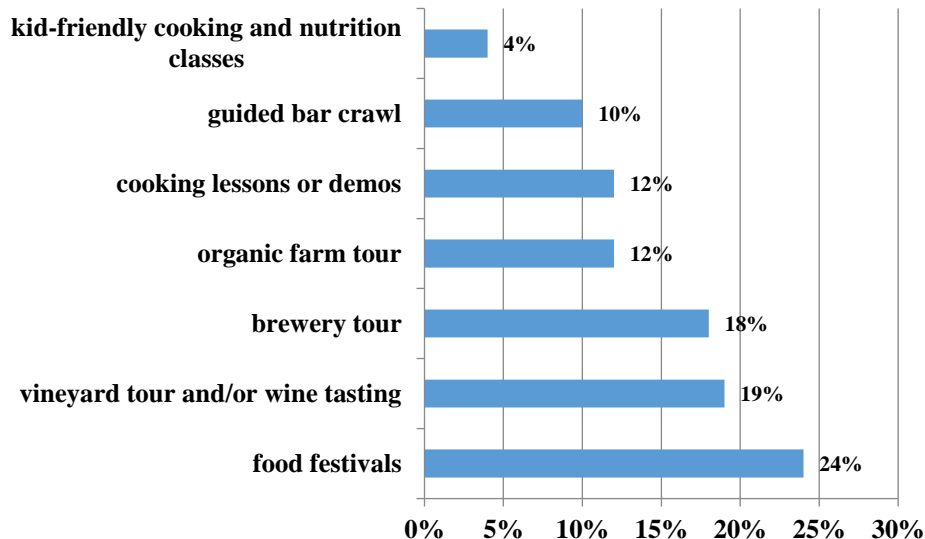


Figure 3. Main culinary events offered by hotels in 2015
Source: Software Advice (2015)

Today, the activity of tourism service providers is subject to fantastic pressures generated by the new trends on the tourism market and globalization, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the need to capitalize on local resources, pushing bidders to find new ways of satisfying consumer demand, food tourism being a viable alternative that creates the premises for a sustainable development of the regional economy.

Considered most of the time as a form of cultural tourism, food tourism still attracts a relatively small number of tourists who are willing to spend significant sums of money to benefit from top quality products offered through authentic experiences, their satisfaction being closely correlated with the consumers' expectations regarding the destination, so the way of communication and the information sent to them through online and offline media channels are the starting point for creating real expectations for food tourism consumers.

3. The Typology of Food Tourism Consumer

In what concerns the issue of the behavior of the consumer of food tourism, the approaches are extremely limited and they mainly take into consideration the fact that the manifested behavior of the consumer of food tourism is influenced by a series of factors with internal and external action, to which the experience of the service is obligatorily added, knowing that in the field of services, and implicitly of tourist services, the consumer is part of the benefit, directly participating in the production and consumption of the service. In addition, the effort the consumer makes in terms of time, physical, mental, etc. costs is inversely proportional to the price of the purchased service, and consumers appreciate differently the usefulness of a service provided according to their own perception of the effort made.

From the prism of the consumer, food can have a multitude of meanings, taking on the following roles (Hall et al., 2003):

- is a vital resource;
- it can be a way of socializing and relaxing;
- it represents a way of knowing new consumer habits, and implicitly of new cultures and subcultures;
- it can be an expression of sensuality and attachment;
- it can be a real ritual.

As mentioned above, for many specialists, the scope of food tourism is aimed at investigating consumer behavior for which gastronomy is the fundamental reason underlying purchasing decisions for tourism services. Thus, according to the World Food Travel report, at the level of 2010, only 8.1% of food travelers indicated gastronomy as the main motivational factor in the decision to purchase tourism services, but their share increasing to 18% in the year 2016 (World Food Travel, 2017). The same source points out that at the level of the year 2016, the interest in culinary activities has increased, with 59% of tourists saying that food and beverages occupy a much more important place within the reasons for the trip, as compared to 5 years ago, when 47% of the respondents said they were buying local products from the tourist shops they had visited, while 45% admitted they had recently participated in at least 5 different culinary activities. 81% of the tourists declared they were interested in finding out details about food and beverages in the area they visited.

With regard to the food traveler typology, the approaches are different depending on the factors of influence considered to be the basis of the consumer's manifested behavior for this type of tourist services.

Thus, it can be appreciated that tourists looking for unique food and drink experiences are generally individuals aged 36-55 with a higher level of education, both women and men, but generally couples spending daily between 100 and 250 euros for authentic culinary experiences (www.foodieandtours.com).

Depending on the importance tourists attach to the culinary experience for, three categories of consumers can be distinguished (CBI - Centre for the Promotion of Imports from developing countries, 2017):

- deliberate culinary tourism, for which the main purpose of the trip is the culinary experience, with the consumer being interested in the local gastronomic culture, willing to spend considerable sums to participate in culinary activities that are perceived as unique and authentic;
- opportunistic culinary tourists, who are tourists who appreciate the gastronomic experience specific to the tourist destination, but this is the main reason for the trip (e.g. 51% of the adventure tourism consumers said they are much more attracted to the tourist packages that include gastronomic experiences);
- accidentally culinary tourists, a segment represented by tourists who participate in culinary activities due to favorable weather on the journey.

An analysis based on the psycho-graphic variables, respectively lifestyle, reveals that tourists with a high interest in culinary activities are generally people who prefer to associate activities, such as: shopping and dining, high arts, gardens and natural attractions, concerts and festivals, gambling horse and auto racing, their preferences for the tourist locations being directed to: a B & B, spa or accommodation at a gourmet restaurant, a seaside resort, a ski resort, a cookery or wine tasting school (Hall et al., 2003).

An extremely important aspect in the analysis of the purchasing process for food and wine products is that at the stage of identifying the need, most of the time the food tourist is not faced with solving a decisional problem, the decision being the result of the way the tourist perceives information related to culinary activities and events, associating them with the fun, the amusement and the delight of enjoying new culinary experiences that delight the senses.

In regard to the information sources, it can be noticed that the search for information is extremely extensive, given the importance and utility attributed to the products and services purchased, which is why the expert and social media sources play an extremely important role in informing the consumer.

4. Conclusions

The benefits of consumer orientation towards this form of tourism are numerous and can be synthesized as follows: educating the taste, consumers' access through short or direct channels of distribution to authentic, high-quality culinary products, awareness of the connections between concerns for personal health, biodiversity conservation and sustainable economic development. Moreover, for the tourist services provider, focusing on the segment of food tourism consumers can lead to benefits in the form of: creating a brand recognized both locally and nationally or internationally, more effective promotion through media channels, more visitors, and implicitly an increase in turnover.

The entry of food tourism into the attention of marketing is easy to understand given that it represents a market niche with a high potential for development in the immediate future due to changes in the forms of manifestation of the behavior of food consumption, the family life cycle and, last but not least, the current trends in demand for sustainable consumption, avoiding semi-prepared products and mass food, encouraging the consumer to buy authentic, certified products that have been recognized as a brand by generations.

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