

THE ROLE OF CATERING SEGMENT FOR GASTRONOMY TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Eriks Lingeberzins¹, Dr.oec., assoc.prof.; Janis Jenzis², MBA

¹Turība University, ²Latvijas Restoranu Biedriba

Abstract. Gastronomy tourism is considered as a tourism type which is characterised by visitor experience of food and related products while travelling. It also includes all related activities such as visiting local farmsteads, participating in gastronomic master classes or gastronomy related events. Tourism destinations and destination management organisations are developing strategies with an aim to stimulate local regional economies by developing them as gastronomy tourism destinations. Targeted attraction of visitors stimulates growth of tourism economic contribution and raise awareness of gastronomic identity. It is claimed that gastronomy tourism has become an independent tourism segment with a positive further development path. This article explores and assess gastronomy tourism development trends in Latvia, specifically analysing core international tourism areas, including Liepāja, Jūrmala and the area of Gauja National Park. Quantitative survey of catering enterprises has been performed to obtain results which have been analysed. Results demonstrate industry willingness to stimulate further development of the related tourism industry sector, at the same time shortcomings indicate on required actions by entrepreneurs and tourism destination management organisations.

Keywords: gastronomy tourism, catering, gastronomy tourism products, culture tourism products.

JEL code: L83.

Introduction

The supply of the catering segment and, accordingly, the companies of the segment that offer catering and related services are part of all travel packages. Regardless of the type of tourism, customer segment, travel motivation or length of stay, catering services are used during any trip. Catering related products - tastings, catering master classes, thematic and seasonal markets etc. are important complementary tourism services that contribute to the development of a tourist destination experience. The competitiveness of individual companies in the catering segment and the sophistication of the product, the knowledge of the demand of the customer segments and the creation of an appropriate supply are the conditions for the development of gastronomic tourism in the destination. Although until recently the concept of gastronomic tourism was understood as a type of tourism aimed at motivating travel, visiting high-quality restaurants and creating an offer that meets the needs of gourmets, the perception of gastronomic tourism has changed over the last decade an approach where the catering segment is an integral part of the destination experience, highlighting the local, traditional, national or modern gastronomic features of the destination, with activities aimed at educating tourists, highlighting local food, gastronomy, cuisine and drinks as an integral part of cultural values.

Compared to the experience and available products of other countries (Bjork, Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2017; Ottenbacher, Harrington, 2003; Gacnik, 2012; Canizares, Castillo-Canalejo, 2015), Latvia cannot be considered a gastronomic tourism destination at present; however, in the offer of Latvia as a tourist destination gastronomy, including local food and traditions and modern approaches related to their preparation, is an important tourist destination. Among the tourism stakeholders - entrepreneurs in the catering segment, tourist destination management organizations, tour operators - travel agencies and operators, as well as some entrepreneurs involved in gastronomic services, the perception of gastronomic tourism is heterogeneous, often contrasted with different development scenarios. The most important reasons are the lack of a unified vision of the concept and priorities of Latvia's gastronomic identity in developing gastronomy tourism. The competitiveness of the catering segment companies and the

1 Eriks.Lingeberzins@turiba.lv
2 Janisjenzis@inbox.lv

conformity of the product to the offer are perceived differently and there are different opinions between the tourism stakeholders about the responsibility of the catering segment and the represented companies and the way of involvement in further product development.

The aim of this paper is to disclose results of a performed quantitative research, aiming to identify the potential of the catering segment in the development of gastronomy tourism in Latvia. It originates from the purpose of the research dedicated to understanding catering segment enterprise comprehension about the gastronomy tourism and to assess the potential and perspectives of further development involving other tourism stakeholders. Current paper covers quantitative data of research further approbated by qualitative methods, but they provide valuable insight to explore current status of product competitiveness to develop gastronomy tourism in Latvia.

The study provided data on 146 catering service providers (sample) represented by 78 catering business owners or managers who were invited to participate in the survey. Respondents were selected according to their geographical location – in areas with the highest number of domestic and international tourists in the period 2019-2021, according to the data of the Central Statistical Bureau (CSB) and exploring their service export potential based on current product presentation. Responses were collected based on a survey, developed after exploring the concept of gastronomy tourism and its development trends in Europe.

1. The understanding of gastronomy in tourism

Even if the food itself does not directly attract tourists to a certain place, the experience created by everyday food can have a positive effect on the overall travel experience and satisfaction with the destination (Bjork, Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2016). The food available at the destination is perceived as one of the experiences during the trip, similar to transportation, accommodation, sightseeing or other services. Thus, a positive gastronomic experience at the destination directly affects the overall traveller satisfaction with the experience (Sotiriadis, 2015).

Two concepts can be distinguished that form the basis for understanding the importance of food in tourism: local food, meaning food served at a specific destination and the local food market as a holistic approach, including food culture, local characteristics, local food supply and consumption, including restaurants (Bjork, Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2016). The experience of other countries also shows that gastronomy, local food, and related traditions not only function as an independent attraction for tourists, but can be the basis for thematic, traditional gastronomic events and festivals (Sotiriadis, 2015), again creating new destination products (events), which directly contribute to the further development of the destination product.

The growing interest in the importance of food and drink in shaping the tourism offer has also sparked a relatively wide-ranging discussion of the concepts, and various terms and concepts have been used in extensive research to date. The Latvian Dictionary of Tourism and Hospitality uses the term "gastronomic tourism", referring to the analogous term in English – "gourmet tourism", and it is understood as a type of tourism, the main purpose of which is national cuisine and high-quality food and drink, high-quality cooked food. enjoyment. Gastronomy tourism is a component of cultural tourism and is aimed at gourmets (Glossary of Tourism and Hospitality Terms, 2008).

However, in the last decade, other concepts have been used in the scientific and professional literature, such as culinary tourism (Canizares, Castillo-Canalejo, 2015; Stewart, Ziraldo, 2008), slow-food movement (Lee, et al., 2015), gastronomic experiences (Akdag, Guler et al., 2017) and others. On the other hand, according to the definition of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the concept of gastronomic tourism is primarily related to the tourist experience of the destination, where it is related to

food and related products consumed during the trip. Consequently, the role of food and drink in shaping the tourism offer can be interpreted in different ways and cannot be limited to gastronomic tourism as a form of tourism but can be considered more broadly. Taking into account the aim and content of the study and taking into account the offer of Latvia as a tourist destination, gastronomic tourism can be considered as a developing type of tourism, while the gastronomic tourism offer can be considered as existing and developing tourism products intended for a wider circle of tourists visiting Latvia.

Referring to research over the last decade, the concepts of food, culture and tourism can be closely integrated (Garibaldi, Pozzi, 2017). The trend in recent decades for local people to use as many local products as possible is justified by the perception of local products as more sustainable, environmentally friendly choices or more socially responsible behaviour (Bjork, Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2016).

As gastronomy tourism is essentially based on "local" involvement in the development of tourism products, the creation of this type of authentic experience also makes a significant contribution to the development of sustainable tourism (Sims, 2009). Marketing activities and any form of communication that touches on gastronomy or local food traditions is not just about informing tourists, it is about creating an understanding and attitude of the local population that aims to build a gastronomic heritage-based offer (Henderson, 2009). The availability of gastronomic tourism products, in accordance with the habits and behaviour of tourists, is necessary when creating a destination product. It is important that gastronomic tourism products are not only created by those who work in the industry and have a good knowledge of tourism or gastronomy, but also by those who understand other cultures. Food is part of the culture, so there are significant cultural differences when creating gastronomic tourism products (Ottenbacher, Harrington, 2003).

Gastronomy can be seen as a means of forming and developing a national identity. Food and what we think of it have to do with basic cultural aspects. The concepts of national identity and gastronomy are intertwined and are becoming increasingly important in tourism marketing (Senkova, Matusikova, 2021). In turn, the measures aimed at popularizing the gastronomic offer, creating a gastronomic identity, and developing the gastronomic tourism offer also promote the local population's understanding of the importance of gastronomy as a resource in the development of tourism products and are the basis for attracting tourists.

Factors that determine the interest of both locals and tourists in exploring the local gastronomic offer by attending thematic events are related to gaining experience, social prestige, and authenticity. The difference in motivational factors also determines the need to create an offer according to the different needs and interests of tourist segments, depending on their interests and attitudes towards the gastronomic offer in general (Lopez-Guzman, Lotero et al., 2016).

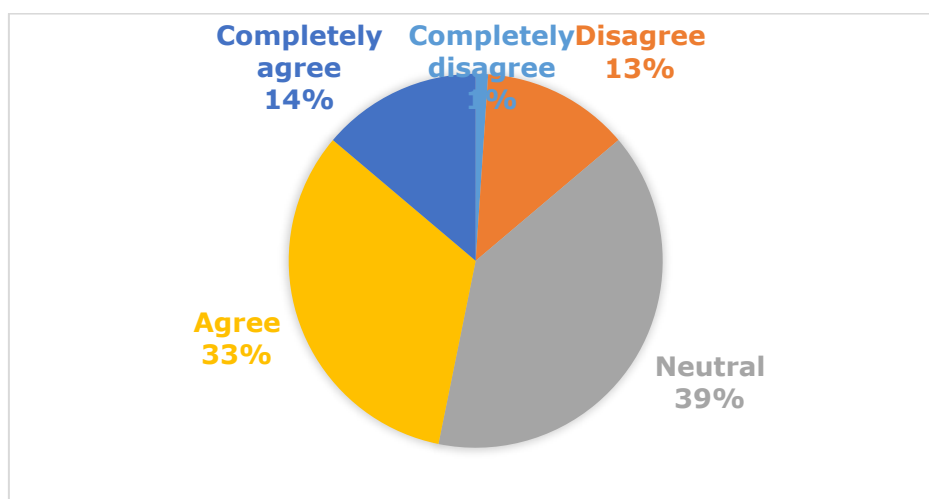
2. The role of catering segment in the development of gastronomy tourism products

According to the surveyed entrepreneurs of the catering segment, the gastronomic offer is an important value of Latvian culture and, considering the experience of other countries and research on the development of the gastronomic tourism segment, it is one of the most important preconditions for the development of gastronomic tourism. According to the entrepreneurs of the catering segment, 81.91% agree or fully agree that the gastronomic offer is significant in the value of Latvian culture (37.23% agree and 44.68% fully agree, respectively). Among all respondents, only 17.02% of respondents gave a neutral answer and only 1.06% do not agree with this statement. These data show that, in general, the catering segment is positive about the development opportunities of the gastronomic offer and, taking into account the experience of other countries discussed above, is an important precondition for further product development.

The highest rating, given separately to the destinations included in the study, was given by the surveyed catering segment entrepreneurs in Jurmala (average rating 4.44, rated according to Likert scale 5-point rating), followed by Liepaja and surrounding entrepreneurs (4.25), Riga (4.23) and Sigulda, Cesis, Ligatne, Valmiera and entrepreneurs in the surrounding catering segment (4.21). Looking at the assessment of attitudes towards gastronomy as a value of Latvian culture, it is the highest among the answers of entrepreneurs in the catering segment, who have indicated a full-service restaurant as their main activity. This assessment is statistically significant in comparison with the answers provided by the respondents, who indicated a lifestyle restaurant, a pub and a café as their main activity. The types of activities included in the study have been selected taking into account the generally accepted division of the catering segment companies, as well as the current characteristics of the Latvian catering segment companies in implementing the marketing and sales activities of their offer.

In order to assess the general opinion of the catering segment about the compliance of the offer of Latvia as a gastronomic tourism destination with the demand of tourists, the respondents' agreeing or rejecting attitude towards the question was assessed (Figure 1).

The opinion of the entrepreneurs of the catering segment about gastronomic tourism and gastronomic offer is an important precondition in the study of gastronomic tourism and, referring to the research of other countries, and leading the development of gastronomic tourist destinations.



Source: author's data according to the research

Fig. 1. Gastronomy tourism supply compliance with the demand

Among all respondents, 47% agree with the statement in full or in part, 15% disagree in whole or in part, and 39% of respondents indicate that their attitude is neutral. The high proportion of neutral answers, as later confirmed by the conclusions obtained using qualitative research methods, shows that the entrepreneurs of the catering segment do not have a full-fledged and versatile offer on the role and importance of gastronomic offer in the development of a competitive gastronomic tourism destination.

The distribution of answers allows concluding that when evaluating the activities implemented so far, which have been aimed at promoting the gastronomic offer of the destination, it is not possible to provide an unequivocally substantiated opinion. The observation may also indicate the need to improve cooperation between the catering segment companies and other tourism stakeholders, creating an appropriate offer that promotes the competitiveness of the destination.

Asked whether the destination where the represented company hosts gastronomic tourism promotion activities (traditional markets, street markets, promotion campaigns etc.) (Table 1), most respondents answered in the affirmative, indicating that they take place at the same time. The destinations included in

the study have a high proportion of respondents who have indicated that they have no opinion. The relatively lowest proportion of respondents who have answered in the affirmative about the gastronomic tourism promotion measures taking place at the destination is in Riga, where the highest proportion of those who indicate that they have no opinion on the respective issue is also present.

On the other hand, the highest proportion of respondents who answered affirmative whether gastronomic tourism promotion activities take place were based on is in Sigulda, Cesis, Valmiera, Ligatne and the surrounding area. Affirmative response rate there was over 80% of respondents and subsequently lowest number of those stating they had no opinion regarding events for the promotion of gastronomic tourism in the area.

Table 1

The presence of gastronomy tourism promotion events

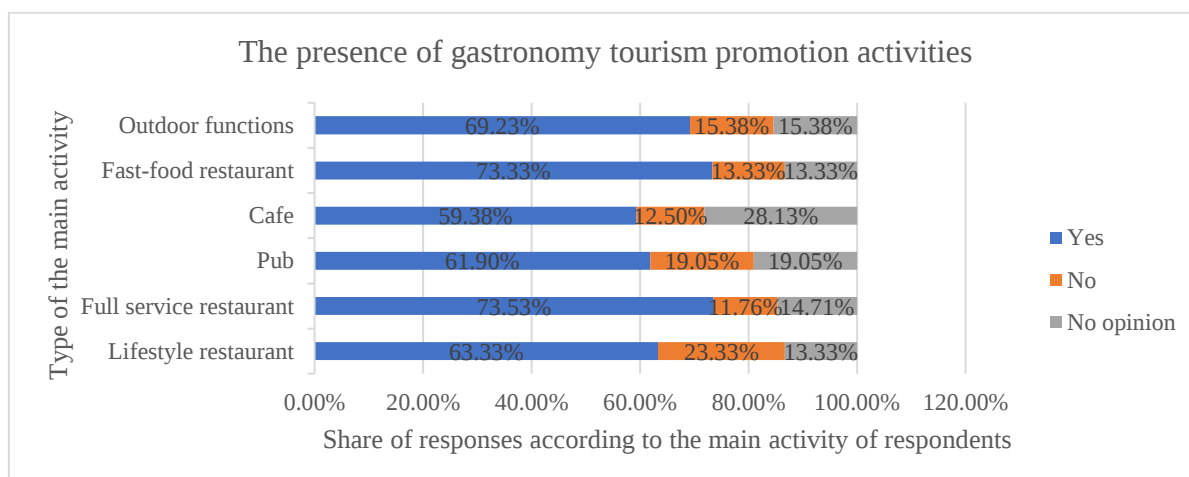
Tourism destination (origin of respondents)	There are gastronomy tourism promotion events		
	Yes	No	No opinion
Riga	47.06%	29.41%	23.53%
Jurmala	66.67%	13.33%	20.00%
Liepaja	66.67%	16.67%	16.67%
Sigulda, Cesis, Ligatne, Valmiera	80.95%	14.29%	4.76%

Source: author's data based on the research

Respondents who gave a positive answer thus confirming that they were aware of the gastronomic tourism promotion activities taking place at the destination, indicated in most cases (54.3%) that they sometimes take part in the activities, but 30.4% said that they take part in the activities. In turn, 8.7% answered that they were planning to participate in such events in the future, but 6.5% did not participate and accordingly were not planning to participate in the future. It can be concluded that in most cases those companies that are aware of the measures promoting the development of the gastronomic tourism offer also participate in them, at least in some cases.

Among those who have indicated that they always or sometimes participate in the events promoting the gastronomic tourism offer at the destination, most often are companies of the catering segment whose main activity is indicated as follows: a full-service restaurant; lifestyle restaurant or cafe; relatively less - pubs, fast food companies and outdoor catering.

Looking at the surveyed companies separately in terms of the existence of measures to promote gastronomic supply at the destination, taking into account their indicated main business segment (Figure 2), the most common businesses are: full-service restaurants (73.53%) and fast-food companies (73.33%), which have confirmed that the measures to promote gastronomic supply are usually taking place at the destination in which they work. On the other hand, these are the companies whose main activity is indicated as a cafe. Among this type of main activity, companies also have the highest share of those who indicate that they do not have an opinion or promotional activities take place in their main place of business (28.13%). The relatively high proportion of respondents who have indicated that they do not have an opinion on the activities taking place at the destination may indicate the need for destination management organisations to seek solutions by involving them in the flow of information, ensuring that they are aware of the activities. Improving the exchange of information can also contribute to the further development of the overall offer of a tourist destination.



Source: author's calculations based on the research data

Fig. 2. Promotion activity assessment breakdown by business segments

Compared to the answers provided to other questions included in the study, it can be concluded that in general, those companies whose main activity is full-service restaurants and lifestyle restaurants are more involved in the promotion of gastronomic offerings. At the same time, this can be seen as a future task for destination management organisations to ensure a more diverse involvement of catering companies in the development of a suitable product.

The average assessment of the surveyed catering companies, answering the question about advertising of Latvia as a tourist destination, is the highest among the respondents whose place of operation is Jurmala (average evaluation 3.60 based on 5-point Likert scale evaluation), followed by Liepaja and surroundings (3.50), Sigulda and Gauja National Park area (3.45) and Riga (3.44). However, taking into account the possible statistical error in the evaluation of answers, the authors consider that in the destinations included in the study (Riga, Jurmala, Liepaja and surroundings, Sigulda, Cesis, Ligatne, Valmiera and surroundings) there are no significant differences.

Of those companies that agree or fully agree that in Latvia gastronomic offer is advertised as a tourist destination and meets the tourist demand, 47.06% are located in Riga, 50% in Liepaja, 47.62% in Sigulda, Cesis, Valmiera and the surrounding area, 46.67% in Jurmala and 33.33% elsewhere. However, of those companies that completely disagree, disagree or have answered neutrally, 52.94% are located in Riga, 53.33% in Jurmala, 52.38% in Sigulda, Cesis, Valmiera, Ligatne and its surroundings, 50% in Liepaja and 66.67 % elsewhere.

Thus, even though the average rating of the surveyed companies in Jurmala is higher than in other areas included in the study, more than half of the surveyed companies are sceptical about advertising of the gastronomic offer and its compliance with tourist demand.

Moreover, looking at the data by the indicated type of main activity of the company (choosing from the proposed answer options), a relatively higher rating of the gastronomic tourism offer advertised at the destination and its compliance with tourist demand was provided by catering companies that identify themselves as lifestyle restaurants and full service restaurants (average score 3.67 and 3.71, respectively), while lower, also taking into account the statistical error, was provided by companies that have indicated a café as their main activity.

Although the companies whose main activity is indicated as a pub have also given a lower rating due to the allowable statistical error, this difference is not statistically significant, but is considered indicative.

3. Gastronomy tourism offers

At the same time, catering enterprise offers, their menus and promotion of gastronomy offers is the crucial element in gastronomy tourism development. Survey focused on two main areas – traditional gastronomy offers and modern gastronomy offers. In the introductory part of the questionnaire, which was used, a brief explanation was given about the concept of traditional and modern gastronomy offer - the offer of modern Latvian gastronomy is considered to be diversified, using regional products, encouraging the formation of new traditions. Historically, traditional Latvian cuisine is considered to be a traditional Latvian gastronomic offer.

Among all respondents, the traditional Latvian gastronomic offer is most often highlighted in the menu, to which 53.76% of all respondents answered in the affirmative, while the least modern Latvian gastronomic offer - only 26.88% of the respondents answered in the affirmative thus confirming that such an offer is highlighted in the menu. However, even though Latvia's gastronomic offer can be considered as a part of the local culture, the correlation analysis does not show significant close correlations between gastronomic issues as a significant value of Latvian culture and does not give evidence that the menus of the traditional Latvian gastronomic offer, modern Latvian gastronomic offer, local products, place of origin of products or local delicacies are highlighted. There is a moderate correlation between gastronomy as a cultural value of Latvia and the use of products of domestic producers and farmers and suppliers of local markets in the creation of the offer.

It can be concluded that despite the fact that the majority of respondents acknowledge gastronomy as an important value of Latvian culture, it is not possible to unequivocally state that it is highlighted in the menus of the catering segment companies.

In a separate question about local and traditional drinks (indicating the possible options that are understood in the study as local and traditional drinks), 66.7% of all respondents also indicated that they highlight local drinks, such as beer, cider, house wine, Riga balm etc. in their menu.

On the other hand, when answering the question whether the advertising of the company and its offer highlights the traditional, local, or seasonal gastronomic offer, 56.4% of the respondents agree or fully agree with the statement, and only 12.8% do not agree or strongly disagree. The average assessment of the extent to which respondents agree with this statement is 3.84 (out of 5), so the overall assessment suggests that catering companies tend to highlight traditional, modern, local, or seasonal gastronomic offerings when advertising their offerings. Companies that do not have their main place of business in Riga have relatively more often confirmed that they highlight such an offer by advertising the company and its offer. The average rating of full-service restaurants is the highest (4.35), while it is the lowest in pubs and cafes, at 3.38 and 3.34, respectively.

In turn, as other possible activities that can be implemented to develop the gastronomic tourism offer in Latvia, which the respondents have indicated are aimed at the following.

Firstly, measures to promote the development of tourism, which are aimed at attracting foreign tourists and the resumption of tourism flows in the current circumstances, reducing the restrictions caused by the pandemic. It is pointed out that the development of gastronomic offer and also gastronomic tourism in Latvia can take place by purposefully promoting the attraction of foreign tourists, taking into account the solvency of the local market for gastronomic tourism offers.

Secondly, by continuing to implement the already known "Restaurant Weeks", promoting such activities also in those regions where they have not yet been implemented. The "House Cafe Days" implemented in 2021 by *Lauku Ceļotājs* with the support of Investment and Development Agency of Latvia (LIAA) were

highlighted as a very successful example, which, according to the respondents, can be developed and made a strong and significant event for promotion of gastronomic products in Latvia. It is pointed out that activities in this format can also be expanded to include thematic activities.

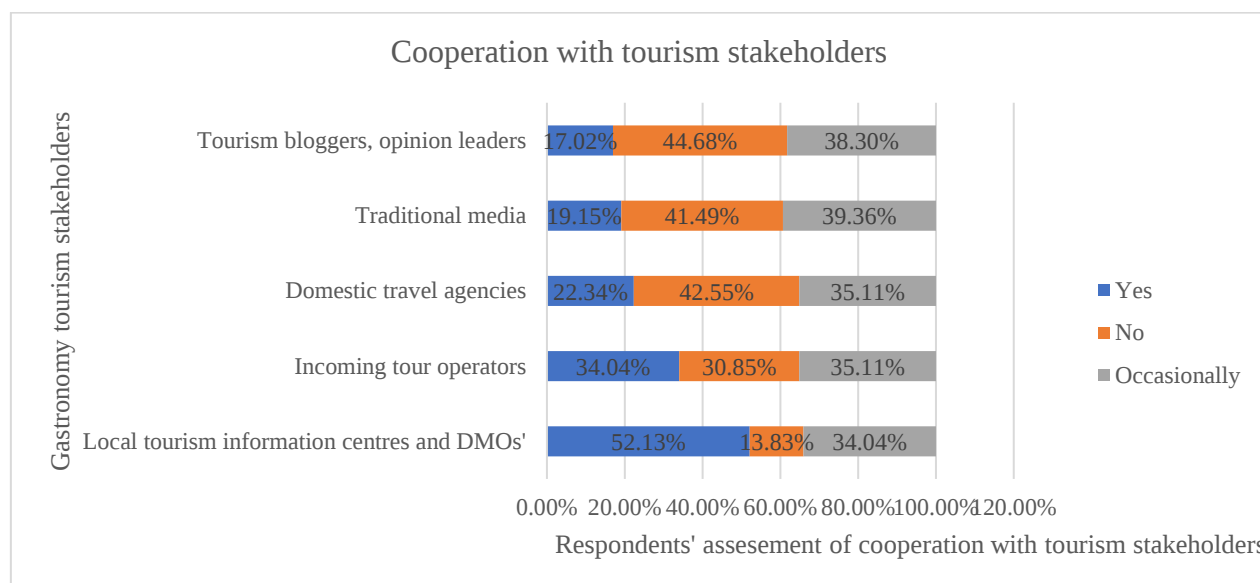
Thirdly, purposeful internal and external communication activities aimed at certain target customer segments, including attracting foreign tour operators, promoting the inclusion of gastronomic tourism products in their offerings, as well as creating a gastronomic tourism identity for the whole Latvia and certain regions and tourist destinations. In turn, the promotion of the exchange of experience between the involved parties, including the participants of the catering segment and other stakeholders of the gastronomic tourism products, is highlighted as internal communication.

Separating the companies of the catering segment according to the type of their main activity, the evaluation of lifestyle restaurants for the proposed factors promoting the development of the product is relatively lower for all statements. On the other hand, thematic excursions, and trips as well as tasting offers are the most highly valued product promotion techniques, also distinguishing companies according to their type of core business.

4. The importance of cooperation

But the development of gastronomy tourism as a part of a tourism destination identity and the development of gastronomy tourism products requires cooperation among all involved tourism stakeholders. Networking is integral to the development of destination products and the development of individual tourism products.

To highlight the gastronomic tourism-offer, local tourism information centres (TICs) and other tourism management organisations are the most common partners in the catering segment (Figure 3). Although 52.13% of the respondents have indicated that they co-operate and another 34.04% do so occasionally, there is no close correlation between the answers to this question and the question of whether there are measures to promote gastronomic supply at the destination. However, among those who have indicated that they are cooperating with local TICs and other destination management organisations, 32.66% have indicated that there are no gastronomic tourism promotion activities in the destination they operate, such as traditional markets, street markets or gastronomic promotion. campaigns. Those companies that have answered that they do not cooperate with local Tourism Information Centres (TICs) have most often indicated Riga as their main place of business. In the other cities included in the study, TICs are not available, or their number is statistically insignificant.



Source: author's calculations based on the research data

Fig. 3. Cooperation of organizations with tourism stakeholders

In turn, incoming tour operators are the second most frequently mentioned cooperation partner for the promotion of gastronomic offer as was mentioned by 34.04% of the respondents. The respondents whose main place of business is Jurmala (52%), Liepaja (38.46%) and Riga (37.2%) have most often indicated incoming tourism operators as cooperation partners for the promotion of gastronomic tourism.

In contrast, tourism bloggers and opinion leaders are the most frequently mentioned partners with whom companies in the catering segment do not cooperate - 44.68% answered in the negative. A larger share of companies has indicated Jurmala and Liepaja as their main place of business, 60% and 45%, respectively.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

- 1) Entrepreneurs in the catering segment in Latvia are aware of gastronomy as a cultural value of Latvia; however, even though culture is one of the core values of Latvia as a tourist destination, gastronomy is not positioned as a significant cultural value in the opinion of entrepreneurs in the catering segment. However, the involvement of the companies of the catering segment themselves and the attitude towards the ongoing measures promoting gastronomic tourism is ambiguous, thus more active involvement can be a factor promoting the development of gastronomic tourism. Closer partnership between professional organizations, destination management organizations in charge of tourism development and individual entrepreneurs can be seen as preconditions to rise overall awareness and promote understanding of the gastronomic concept and possibilities it can offer as a tourism type for destination competitiveness.
- 2) Catering segment is expected to be more actively involved in the gastronomy tourism product development, becoming an important tourism stakeholder, raising awareness, and understanding of the importance of gastronomy tourism and its related tourism economic impact. Cooperation remains a crucial factor in the planning process of further activities and the product development. Destination management organizations are the primary partners and through the development of destination development strategies partnership models should be promoted.
- 3) Successful gastronomy tourism destination development is highly dependent on active engagement of all catering business segments in the product development. Current data show that there are differences depending on primary business activity rather than on geographical location of catering

enterprises, and these observations suggest emphasising the need to increase overall cross-industry knowledge about the gastronomy tourism as a tourism type, related demand. Conceptual education of tourism entrepreneurs in charge of supply as well as mass media communication towards education of demand side (tourists) is seen as a supportive mechanism for the future development. Traditional and social mass media can play an important role in changing demand trends by rising awareness and understanding of the tourism product.

4) It can be recommended to tourism destination management organisations to identify the potential of gastronomy tourism and to promote the benefits to all involved tourism stakeholders and not only to the catering segment enterprises. Successful development of gastronomy tourism products can have a positive impact on overall tourism destination experience and tourist satisfaction, reflecting also in tourism economic contribution. Catering segment organizations should be perceived as an important segment in the context of all destination development and product development process.

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