

Traditional Bulgarian foods in the Horeca sector as a factor of choice for the tourist destination

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Abstract

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In recent years, the culinary culture expressed in food preparation, marketing and consumption, as elements of the Horeca model, has established as one of the main components for the fortification of touristic destinations. The traditional cuisine has an important place in the growing structure of tourism. The objective of this study is to determine the influence of traditional Bulgarian cuisine in the choice of a tourist destination. The methodology of this study involved conducting surveys and the data are collected from local and foreign tourists (n = 150) who visit three of the main cities in Bulgaria (Sofia, Varna, and Plovdiv). The results of the study showed that the destination selection decision could be influenced by many factors as the local cuisine (local production of traditional foods) (88%), natural and historical resources of the country (76%), and cultural heritage (52%). Among the factors affecting tourist decision to consume traditional foods are determined: the well-defined destination image, local cuisine accessibility, eating and drinking habits of destination residents.

Practical applications: this study contributes to the marketing potential for the tourism industry, regional development, and hospitality business, exploring the local food as a key element of the Horeca sector for choosing a tourist destination.

Keywords: Bulgarian foods; Horeca sector; destination choice; tourism; traditional

Introduction

Tourism, which is an important source of income for countries, has made significant progress with the rise in the living standards of people and with changing travel trends. The changing living conditions defy revisions in the search for tourist products. Mass tourism begins to lose its importance and is replaced by alternative types of tourism. People prefer to split their holiday into a few pieces and look for ways to satisfy their interests by discovering different places and cultures.

Due to its cultural, historical heritage and natural resources, Bulgaria is a preferred tourist destination by local and foreign tourists. Bulgarian traditional cuisine is a set of

tastes combined with traditional cooking techniques and local food products in the context of the diversity of culinary regions in Bulgaria. A factor for the development of culinary variety is also the ethnocultural differences of the population in different regions.

Undoubtedly, eating is part of cultural tourism as it is considered to be a way of discovering the cultural heritage of the particular destination. The transformation of gastronomy into one of the branches of tourism has led to an increased interest in studying food history and culture. The culture could be seen and conceived through the senses, and the proof of this is the mass visit of foreigners and not only, in a certain country which shares the novelty and the transformation of the culture of nutrition. (Jiménez-Beltrán et al., 2016).

Food as an element of the Horeca sector plays an important role in shaping the overall tourist experience. Although food is not always a major reason for pursuing original culinary trips, the meeting of the traveler with a good meal is crucial for gaining full satisfaction from the trip. In other words, food may not be the main reason for choosing a destination, but has an important potential to frustrate the satisfaction of the tourist due to discontent with the available food (Smith & Costello, 2009). Food is a factor that helps differentiation of a destination and is therefore considered as a determinant of the culture and lifestyle of the population. Food as an aspect of the Horeca sector is not perceived as a single entity, but in its overall appearance, the interaction and attitude of local residents and the cooking techniques used also play a significant role (Kim et al., 2009; Tsai & Lu, 2012; Everett & Slocum, 2013).

As a result of the hectic daily life, the time at which people have food preparation is changing, and more and more people are eating out – 10-30% of the total daily intake of energy. In recent years, consumers/tourists have become increasingly aware of health problems and are interested in preserving or improving their health through eating. According to several studies, for most tourists, food quality is at least as important as the good climatic conditions and nature (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Okumus et al., 2007; Zepeda & Deal, 2009; Bekar & Belpinar, 2015).

Developed tourist destinations such as Spain, France, and Italy, organize excursions, including gastronomy training and lectures, like cheese making and local food and drink tasting. Bezirgan and Koc (2013) determined that foods and beverages, offered at local markets, act upon the formation of affection toward the destination. The gastronomy as part of the Horeca model could be ranked as an important marketing tool when differentiating the image of the destination (Fields, 2002). The study of Toksoz and Aras (2016) for the role of local food in tourists' travel motivation proposed to determine the effectiveness of cues that report for the underlying consumption of the locals. Today, Gastro shows have become part of the tour packages and a mass of curious tourists are interested in the history of local tastes. Moreover, the attitude of food-cuisine-culture, in the context of local and universal culinary tastes, started to attract the interest of many people who have begun to travel both to local-cuisine destinations and to far-off culinary cultures (Williams et al., 2014; Jiménez-Beltrán et al., 2016).

Visiting museums is one of the easiest ways to explore a country. As it has been said earlier, food is another way to explore the culture and lifestyle of the local population and, accordingly, the combination of culture, visiting museums, festivals and events with culinary experiences

is a complex method of touching the spirit of the destination. So, museums do not always embody the history and works of art, because they could also attract visitors with their sausages, mushrooms, cheese, and noodles while traveling fully of taste. There are food-related museums, festivals and events in different parts of the world and create a precondition for the development of tourism in the region (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). The museum of Guinness brewery, the 'Musée du Champignon's (Mushroom museum), Olive Museum of Italy, cheese Museum of Amsterdam, the beer festival in Germany are just some of the examples for how food, accepted as local and traditional for the region may be the reason for visiting the appropriate destination. It is known that food has sensory appeal, and the question of how far tourists are interested in food safety remains it is rarely studied and enveloped as an interest (Mak et al., 2012). A number of studies for the factors that had a major influence on selecting different destinations have been reported (Bekar & Belpinar, 2015; Dayour & Adongo, 2015), but to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study for the role of local production of traditional foods in making decisions to select Bulgaria as a tourist destination.

The objective of this study is to determine the role of traditional Bulgarian foods in the Horeca sector as a factor of choice for the tourist destination.

Material and Methods

Methodology

The survey comprises foreign tourists (n = 150), from different age groups (up to 18-70 years old) visiting the three largest and preferred destinations in Bulgaria – Sofia, Plovdiv, and Varna during July 2018. The questionnaire that was compiled and used in the study was developed taking into consideration the review of the scientific literature and the methods used by previous researchers.

In order to ensure the reliability of the study, a literature review has been made beforehand, followed by an English-language questionnaire, which was tested with 15 randomly chosen respondents who reflected that they had not encountered difficulties in completing the survey and that the language is easy to understand.

The questionnaire was introduced to the respondents and the purpose of the study was explained. They were invited to participate in the survey and it was distributed among those who agreed to participate. The completed questionnaires were collected immediately. It was explained that the answers will be completely anonymous and confidential and no personal details will be reported in the study or any resulting publications.

Statistical Methods

In accordance with the aim of the research, it was necessary to conduct several comparisons between four or more rank variables. The chosen level of significance was $\alpha = 0.05$. In order to choose the appropriate method for comparison, a test for normal distribution was used. It showed that most of the samples were not from normally distributed populations. Hence, the implementation of one-way ANOVA was under question. Since the samples consisted of 50 or more elements the ANOVA could be applied if the variances were equal. According to the Leven's test, however, the variances were not homogeneous ($p < 0,001$) therefore the non-parametrical Friedman rank test was used to conduct the comparisons. The multiple comparisons after the Friedman test were performed with the Sign test for ranked data.

Results and Discussion

The study sought to examine the motivations of foreign tourists for choosing the three most visited destinations in Bulgaria, according to the statistics received by the Ministry of Tourism – Sofia, Plovdiv, and Varna. Table 1 represents the ranking analysis of the reasons for selecting a tourist destination. The percentages of the participants that had given ranks of “important or very important” of the results for Plovdiv, Sofia, Varna, and of all towns together, correspondingly, were given. Table 1 shows also the actual mean scores and the standard deviations on items under each component. Comparisons were performed in two directions: first vertically between the reasons ranked by all 153 participants (column 8) and then horizontally between the towns for each of the reasons (columns 2, 4, and 6). As mentioned above the Friedman test was applied in order to conduct the comparisons in both directions. Column 10 represents the p-values of the Friedman test applied between the towns. Values in bold are less than the significance level $\alpha = 0.05$ and show that there is a significant difference among the mean ranks in the corresponding row. Then the Sign test was applied for multiple comparisons for these rows and the results are represented in Table 1 as follows: mean values, followed by the same lower case letters in a row do not differ significantly. For example in the first row, the p-value is less than 0.05. Hence the mean ranks of the reason “Weather conditions” differ significantly for Sofia, Plovdiv, and Varna. The Sign test applied after that shows where the difference is. Since Plovdiv and Sofia are denoted with the same lower case letter “a”, then they do not differ significantly, whereas the results for Varna are different.

In a similar way there was conducted the mean ranks comparison of the 11 reasons for a destination choice. In column 8

Table 1. Reasons for selecting a tourist destination

| Reasons for selecting a tourist destination | Plovdiv | | Sofia | | Varna | | All | | Friedman test p-values |
|---|-------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | Mean rank | Important or very important | Mean rank | Important or very important | Mean rank | Important or very important | Mean rank | Important or very important | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| Weather conditions | 2.00 ± 0.98 *a*** | 75% | 1.82 ± 0.81a | 86% | 1.53 ± 0.73 | 90% | 1.77 ± 0.87 AB**** | 83% | 0.0495* |
| Cultural heritage | 2.27 ± 0.89 | 59% | 2.71 ± 0.98 | 45% | 2.75 ± 1.09 | 53% | 2.58 ± 0.99 CD | 52% | 0.1009 |
| Local foods | 1.88 ± 0.71 | 84% | 1.69 ± 0.65 | 90% | 1.61 ± 0.72 | 90% | 1.73 ± 0.69 AE | 88% | 0.1327 |
| Shopping possibilities | 4.31 ± 0.73 | 0% | 3.12 ± 1.51a | 39% | 3.59 ± 1.20 a | 25% | 3.67 ± 1.28 | 22% | 0.0005 |
| Safety and security | 1.00 ± 0 | 100% | 1.00 ± 0 | 100% | 1.22 ± 0.42 | 100% | 1.07 ± 0.26 | 100% | 0.1687 |
| Prices | 1.76 ± 1.09 | 86% | 1.80 ± 0.89 | 76% | 1.96 ± 0.85 | 75% | 1.84 ± 0.95 BEF | 79% | 0.3069 |
| Destination location | 2.31 ± 0.99 | 57% | 2.69 ± 0.91 | 41% | 2.39 ± 1.15 | 63% | 2.46 ± 1.03 DG | 54% | 0.1151 |
| Accommodation opportunities | 2.47 ± 1.03 | 53% | 2.61 ± 1.04 | 47% | 2.94 ± 0.81 | 25% | 2.67 ± 0.98 C | 42% | 0.0763 |
| Nature and history | 2.08 ± 0.99 | 69% | 2.12 ± 1.03 | 73% | 1.80 ± 0.76 | 86% | 1.99 ± 0.95 F | 76% | 0.4325 |
| Social life | 2.27 ± 0.85 | 63% | 2.20 ± 0.89 | 69% | 2.29 ± 0.73 | 59% | 2.25 ± 0.82 GH | 63% | 0.9854 |
| Possibilities for different kind of tourism | 2.00 ± 0.72 | 78% | 1.69 ± 0.58a | 94% | 2.73 ± 0.91a | 45% | 2.14 ± 0.86 H | 73% | 0.0000 |

*Values are mean rank ± standard deviation

** p-values in bold are less than $\alpha = 0.05$, which means that there is a significant difference between the mean ranks on the corresponding row (Friedman test, $p < 0.05$)

***Mean ranks followed by the same lower case letters in a row do not differ significantly (Sign test, $p > 0.05$)

****Mean ranks followed by the same upper case letters in column 8 do not differ significantly (Sign test, $p > 0.05$)

the mean ranks followed by the same upper case letters do not differ significantly. For example reasons “Weather conditions” and “Local foods” are denoted with the same upper case letter “A”, hence they do not differ significantly and so on.

It was obvious from the survey that 100% (1.07±0.26) of the respondents choose their destination if they consider it as safe for travel and stay. For most (88.0% or 1.73±0.69) of them, experiencing the food culture as an element of the Horeca model of the destination was among their reason for visiting. In contrast to the results obtained in this study, Zagrali and Akbaba (2015) presented the attractiveness level of local food for tourists visiting İzmir Peninsula and determined that the local food did not play a determinant role in

tourists’ destination choice of the region, although respondents enjoyed the local food and there was a lack of promotion and advertising.

Another 83.0% (1.77±0.87) of the respondents did say that they decided to travel anywhere if the weather conditions are suitable for the kind of alternative tourism that desire to try in the destination. Only 79% of the participants consider the price as a barrier for selecting the destination. The results are consistent with the findings of Hui et al. (2007), who claimed that the factor of price is considered as insignificant form when affecting the overall satisfaction levels of tourists, while food and accommodation are among the highly evaluated attributes.

Table 2. Reasons for selecting a Tourist destination in accordance with the socio-demographic characteristics

| Reasons for selecting a Tourist destination | Weather conditions | Cultural heritage | Local foods | Shopping possibilities | Safety and security | Prices | Destination location | Accommodation opportunities | Nature and history | Social life | Possibilities for a different kind of tourism | Total | Chi-square test |
|---|--------------------|-------------------|-------------|------------------------|---------------------|--------|----------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------|---|-------|----------------------------|
| Age | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | $\chi^2 = 42.31, p = 0.72$ |
| Up to 18 years | 17% | 16% | 16% | 12% | 16% | 17% | 20% | 19% | 15% | 26% | 19% | 16% | |
| 18-29 years | 33% | 33% | 30% | 27% | 31% | 29% | 32% | 31% | 32% | 48% | 26% | 31% | |
| 30-39 years | 28% | 24% | 28% | 36% | 27% | 29% | 20% | 28% | 26% | 18% | 31% | 27% | |
| 40-49 years | 12% | 10% | 11% | 15% | 10% | 10% | 11% | 11% | 12% | 3% | 10% | 10% | |
| 50-59 years | 5% | 10% | 7% | 6% | 7% | 7% | 10% | 3% | 9% | 1% | 6% | 7% | |
| 60 years and more | 6% | 8% | 7% | 3% | 7% | 8% | 9% | 8% | 7% | 4% | 8% | 7% | |
| Status | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | |
| Self-employed | 38% | 37% | 37% | 31% | 38% | 36% | 43% | 38% | 35% | 58% | 36% | 37% | $\chi^2 = 43.29, p = 0.33$ |
| Employed part-time | 1% | 4% | 1% | 8% | 0% | 2% | 2% | 2% | 2% | 3% | 3% | 2% | |
| Employed full-time | 44% | 43% | 46% | 47% | 45% | 45% | 40% | 44% | 46% | 22% | 46% | 44% | |
| Unemployed | 10% | 9% | 9% | 11% | 9% | 8% | 6% | 8% | 10% | 13% | 7% | 9% | |
| Retired | 6% | 7% | 7% | 3% | 7% | 8% | 8% | 8% | 7% | 4% | 8% | 7% | |
| Country | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | $\chi^2 = 25.73, p = 0.99$ |
| Spain | 28% | 28% | 28% | 24% | 27% | 28% | 26% | 33% | 26% | 28% | 28% | 27% | |
| France | 13% | 13% | 16% | 9% | 16% | 18% | 16% | 17% | 14% | 18% | 22% | 16% | |
| Italy | 13% | 13% | 11% | 18% | 13% | 14% | 10% | 16% | 15% | 11% | 17% | 13% | |
| Israel | 9% | 6% | 7% | 3% | 7% | 8% | 9% | 5% | 8% | 8% | 5% | 7% | |
| Germany | 11% | 13% | 13% | 15% | 12% | 11% | 10% | 11% | 12% | 9% | 9% | 12% | |
| Romania | 17% | 16% | 16% | 15% | 15% | 13% | 20% | 16% | 16% | 14% | 14% | 15% | |
| Russia | 9% | 13% | 10% | 15% | 10% | 7% | 11% | 3% | 10% | 11% | 5% | 10% | |

The survey showed that 52% of the respondents were motivated because of cultural reasons. The desire to see nature and explore the history of the destination is cited by 76% of the tourists, while only 22% did mention the shopping possibilities as a factor for selecting a destination. These results are in complete agreement with the literature (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Dayour & Adongo, 2015).

Table 2 profiled the ranks of the reasons for selecting a tourist destination in accordance with the socio-demographic characteristics of the travelers such as age, employment, and nationality. The results of Pearson's chi-square test for each of the characteristics indicate that there are no statistically significant differences.

It is obvious that the majority of the respondents are from Spain (27%), followed by France (16%), and Italy (13%), respectively. When examining the gender of the 153 participants, it is observed that 43% are women and 57% are men; 31% of the participants were at the age between 18 and 29, and the 30-39 age group was 27%. It could be said that a significant part of the participants was young tourists and 44% of the participants were employed full-time and 37% were self-employed (Table 2).

As shown in Table 2, tourists aged between 18 to 29 years old, consider social life as the main factor for choosing a destination.

In terms of sociodemographic profile of the tourists, it is determined that the participants, belonged to the age group of 18-29 years old (30%) and 30-39 years old (28%), as well as the respondents with the status of self-employment (37%) and full-time employment (46%), revealed the greatest interest in local cuisine. The reason for that might be that tourists in the current age status are more interested in collecting information and memories about what they eat at a destination.

Unlike, a number of researches revealed the importance of the age for the perception of gastronomy and local food and according to them, as the tourists are older, the greater is their interest in gastronomy and local foods as part of the Horeca sector (Tse & Crotts, 2005; Mgonja et al., 2016; Perez-Galvez et al., 2017ab).

Sengel et al. (2015) studied the relationship between various demographic and tripographic factors and tourists' perceptions of local food. They concluded that the gender of the participants should be taken into consideration while developing management strategies.

Table 3 presents the results for the level of agreement of respondents concerning a number of statements describing the general image of the restaurants in analyzed three cities with traditional Bulgarian cuisine.

The results show that the perceptions of the participants as a whole for the three cities are positive. When it is analyzed in detail, it could be seen that more information should be prepared for the introduction and presentation of local dishes. In addition, 26% of the participants consider that the introduction of regionally-specific dishes will influence the tourist motive to visit the area again.

The high percentage of tourists declared being satisfied (37% of them indicated that are completely agree with the statement that has a positive opinion about Traditional Bulgarian cuisine). Brokaj (2014) studied the way how the strategies for offering the gastro products may affect the selection of Vlora Region in Albania. According to their results, participants have the desire to experience and meet more local food in the menus, but their general perceptions about the local identity of the restaurants are low.

Perez-Galvez et al. (2017a) analyzed a group of tourists in a different aspect and 41% of the participants were disposed to consume local food because they perceive it more different and unusual than those prepared at their own region. Moreover, the social experience as enjoying a pleasant time with friends is considered as the least significant reason for tasting local food. It could be concluded that tourists show different attitudes toward gastronomy as a variable of interest in the choice of destination. Jalis and Che (2014) concluded that food-related activities such as "culinary lessons", "dining places" and "dining practice" invent the image and identity of food and cuisine, as the local foods including ingredients used in them and preparation techniques applied, play significant role in creating the whole experience dur-

Table 3. Statements for the general image of the restaurants with traditional Bulgarian foods

| Statements for the general image of the restaurants with traditional Bulgarian foods | Completely agree | | | Completely disagree | |
|---|------------------|-----|-----|---------------------|----|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1. I have a positive opinion about Traditional Bulgarian foods | 37% | 38% | 17% | 6% | 2% |
| 2. The staff at the restaurants with traditional Bulgarian foods is friendly towards the guests | 24% | 38% | 27% | 9% | 2% |
| 3. The restaurants/the employees have enough knowledge about local foods | 12% | 38% | 44% | 6% | 0% |
| 4. The local food is delicious but its presentation was not satisfactory | 0% | 3% | 44% | 50% | 3% |
| 5. Local food should be used and presented more widely in the menus | 41% | 39% | 20% | 0% | 0% |
| 6. Local meals will influence my willingness to visit the area again | 12% | 26% | 48% | 14% | 0% |

ing their travels. Okech (2014) confirmed the necessity by diversifying the tourist product as adding the key elements as local food and drink for improving the attractiveness of tourist product. On their study, Feldmann and Hamm (2015) reviewed the purchase behaviors of consumers with regard to local food and is concluded that tourists are able to pay higher prices for locally produced foods.

Conclusions

The needs and desires of tourists are constantly changing and this has an impact on the choice of a tourist destination. There are many factors affecting the traveling; information is very affordable, travel prices, too. It is becoming more and more commons to note that local dishes, which are considered to reflect the culture of destinations, are becoming more important as a factor influencing the preferences of tourists. In this context, the importance and role of local Bulgarian foods as a tourist product must be well defined. In this survey, the three most visited cities in Bulgaria – Sofia, Varna, and Plovdiv, are examined about their potential to attract tourists due to the traditional food and degree of satisfaction and impression of tourists from the point of view of the traditional cuisine.

The results show that the participants perceive the destination as attractive and the majority of tourists like local cuisine as a factor of the Horeca model.

As a result of the conclusions, the following recommendations could be listed:

Traditional marketing strategies should be focused on promoting the characteristics of appropriate regions, including households, the culture, and the cuisine of the local population.

In-place restaurants should concentrate on integrating a larger number of local dishes prepared with local products, from local farmers.

Food and drink businesses in the region could be encouraged to review their existing structures in line with the region's food culture.

Provisions may be developed to allow tourists to participate in food-related activities.

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