

Comparisons of stakeholders' perception towards the developing of cheese tourism. Case study – Gjirokastra region

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Abstract

The rapid development of tourism in recent years opens study perspectives of various dimensions. One of these dimensions is culinary tourism. This paper is an attempt to present, find and discuss from a theoretical and practical point of view some of the problems of culinary tourism, focused on treating the Cheese Road as a specific direction of culinary tourism. The paper offers new knowledge on the cheese road referred to a certain area, specifically in the district of Gjirokastra, which has outstanding tourist values. The analysis proved that cooking is a direction with significant priorities for the development of tourism. Empirical data collected from terrain through the questionnaire were processed using descriptive statistics. The analysis of the data evidenced the interest of the inhabitants of the area for the cheese road. The paper will also bring real obstacles to the development of the cheese route.

Zhvillimi i shpejtë i turizmit në vitet e fundit, hap perspektiva studimi të dimensioneve të ndryshme. Një nga këto dimensione është turizmi kulinar. Ky punim është një përpyetje për të prezantuar, gjetur dhe diskutuar nga pikëpamja teorike dhe

praktike i disa problemeve të turizmit kulinar, të përqendruara në trajtimin e Rrugës së Djathit si një drejtim specifik i turizmit të kulinar. Punimi ofron njohuri të reja mbi rrugën e djathit referuar një zone të caktuar, konkretisht në rrethin e Gjirokastrës, i cili ka vlera të jashtëzakonshme turistike. Analiza provoi se gatimi është një drejtim me përparësi të konsiderueshme për zhvillimin e turizmit. Të dhënat empirike të mbledhura nga terreni përmes pyetësorit u përpunuan duke përdorur statistikën përshkruese. Analiza e të dhënave evidentoi interesin e banorëve të zonës për rrugën e djathit. Materiali gjithashtu do të sjellë edhe pengesa të vërteta për zhvillimin e rrugës së djathit.

Literature review

Tourism, an activity developed for several decades, is now presented in the gastronomic tourism. Approximation of tourism with the concepts of gastronomy stimulates the interest of studying and discovering its specifics such as cheese tourism.

Food or Culinary tourism has been under constant development and expansion over the previous decades, thus leading to the emergence of food tourism studies that tend to focus on food destination. According to these studies, gastronomic tourists are those tourists drawn into certain locations by their willingness to experience satisfaction in all senses but especially in terms of flavour. The gastronomy is an integral part of the cultural, social, environmental, and economic history in every area, it tends to reflect the local lifestyle in the various regions. In addition, it operates as a bridge between tradition and contemporary lifestyle and culture. The local and regional food often provide added value to destinations, particularly in the cases of regions or areas that effectively promote their culinary traditions a major attraction and as a major part of the local identity. The gastronomy and its relation to tourism can become a key aspect in the analysis of the Cross-Border region as a tourist destination, supplementing the already present cultural elements.

Development of this important sector for this region has increased demand for milk which is raw materials for processed products as: cheese, yellow cheese, yogurt, butter, etc. Cheese is a milk product that occupies a crucial place in the diet of both healthy and sick people. Cheese has been used since prehistoric times, since when comes the knowledge of the beginning of its production. Archaeological discoveries are the basis, in the knowledge of the beginning of this process. The oldest pictorial letter for the beginning of the production of cheese, found in Mesopotamia, dates from the period between 3500-2800 BC. There are some examples of previous researches that elevate cheese from a food product, to the status of a tourist product.

There are some examples of previous researches that elevate cheese from a food product, to the status of a tourist product. In this sense, although cheese tourism as a specific type of tourism is still an emerging field of research, there is a growing trend where “cheese tourism creates new destinations and contributes to existing destination branding” (Ermolaev, Yashalova and Ruban, 2019). They stressed: “cheese tourism can be abbreviated as casetourism - ‘caseus’ is a Latin word meaning ‘cheese’”.

The nutritional value of cheese has attracted the attention of both domestic and foreign visitors, making it a tourist destination. Blanco-Murillo (2012) analyzed cheese tourism in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru and concluded that cheese tourism affects tourist preferences and local growth in food production and diversification. According to studies Ritter (1987) who has been a pioneer of cheese tourism studies it turns out that the Cheese Fair in Trujillo, Spain contributes to sustainability.

A very important factor in food tourism is not only the process of eating and tasting, but above all to be interested in the process of preparing meals and traditions related to them. Frequently so-called ‘culinary trophy’ are products that can be easily transported. Based on, Global Food Report (2012) ‘culinary trophy’ is organized in the different forms. So, 35 % of respondents bring cheese, 14 % of them brought food items connected with the local region, such as, honeys and different variants of fish (Global Food Report 2012, 10).

Local cheese in farmers’ markets affected to community and tourism development in Canterbury, New Zealand. Food tourism has been spreading during the recent decades, both in urban and rural zone. As far as cheese tourism involves visiting areas of cheese making and milk production (Fusté, 2015), where largely milk production means richness of the land.

The cheese making process in the Canterbury region is mainly carried out from cows’ milk, but some of the producers uses milk from goats and sheep. The Region of Canterbury has some cheese firms – among which Barrys Bay Traditional Cheese, Emilio’s Cheese, Karikaas Natural Dairy Products, Mt Grey Cheese or Talbot Forest Cheese. Can be highlighted and their presence in local markets is important to promote their brands and supply their pieces of cheese, especially for cheese producers such as Emilio’s Cheese and Mt Grey Cheese, who distribute only locally.

According to Naalyan (2014), visits to the markets themselves are an expression of the desire of tourists to experience authentic local products, nonetheless most of the visitors to New Zealand’s farmers’ markets are local people so far. “Food tourism creates wonderful opportunities for better integration of local communities in the tourism industry. Thus tourism acquire sustainable and socially responsible nature. Lizet (1998) explained that local cheese production in the Abundance region of the French Alps facilitates site marking and visitor perception.

Definitively, a Farmers' Market is a food market where visitors can find food produced in local areas and where the sellers must be directly involved in the growing or production process of the food (New Zealand Farmers Market, 2015). Cheese tourism involves the visit to areas of cheese making and milk production, which means that this special interest tourism is primarily practiced in rural, mountain, and natural areas.

Fusté-Forné (2015) stressed: "There are some examples of previous researches that elevate cheese from a food product, to the status of a tourist product. In this sense, although cheese tourism as a specific type of tourism is still an emerging field of research, there is a growing trend where "cheese tourism creates new destinations and contributes to existing destination branding". While, Blanco Murillo (2012) analyzed cheese tourism in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru concluded that cheese tourism affects local growth of food production and diversification.

Ikenga (2001) acknowledged that cheese production in a local agricultural cooperative and availability in local restaurants supports the management of alpine pastures and their importance for ecotourism in the Austrian Alps. Lenglet and Giannelloni (2016) found that its perceived authenticity is a significant factor in consumer interest. For, Quan and Wang (2004), over a third of tourists spend their holidays on food. This proves that local cuisine is an inseparable aspect of the holiday experience. While, Hall and Sharples (2013) prove that the trip includes various gastronomic visits, festivals, food fairs and food producers, cooking shows and demonstrations, all that you have a chance to try a quality food product. These activities are important. For this, Torri and Salini (2016), examined the client's taste preferences in relation to the famous Parmigiano Reggiano cheese at a food exhibition. Some articles are about destination brand through cheese tourism.

As above, there are researchers who have also reserve about cheese tourism. Pachoud and Coy (2018) addressed a very specific problem related to the production of Serrano cheese in the Campos region de Cima da Serra of Brazil and its sale to local visitors. Surprisingly, this tourism is important craft activity faces sanitary reserves. Further they admitted this tourism is important, the craft activity faces sanitary restrictions and only the emergence of a local initiative representing the interests of cheese producers is it able to solve the problem? Bava et al (2018) have found that the increasing traditional production of the famous Grana Padano cheese produces quite a lot of environmental effects and contributes to the constant climate change.

In this context, Yonzon and Hunter (1991) found that the production of artisanal cheese (in response to visitor demand) in the Langtang National Park in the Nepal Himalayas leads to the point of overgrazing and landscape degradation. These specialists went so far as to recommend limiting cheese production and increasing the price of cheese (they also noted that the price is too high for locals, while foreign visitors would not judge it to be too high).

Methodology

The study purpose is to identify connection between primary sector, culinary tradition and tourism. It will study in Cross Border region opportunity to involve of Cheese Route in regional policies and strategies.

Geographical coverage:

Geographical coverage is the region of Gjirokastra. This region was chosen for the following reasons:

1. a medieval town dating back to the 13th century;
2. for the typical buildings of Oriental architecture with native elements. For the uniqueness of its architecture and its rare medieval values.
3. Gjirokastra is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Questionnaire study:

The purpose of the questionnaire was to explore the local interest in the Cheese Route and the ways each interested party could be interested to participate or to support to the Cheese Route activities, in addition to their viewpoints on any potential problems that could be encountered. The questionnaire is structured in three sections: 1. General Information, 2. Production Information, 3. Link to Cheese Cult.

Target groups: The questionnaire study was based on information from tourism and cultural stakeholders, local enterprises, dairy producers, retailers, and local authorities.

Analysis of result

Gjirokastra region has important tourist attractions, and this has led to an increase in the number of the tourists over the years. Based on available statistical data for the period 2017-2019, number of visitors in two important destinations of this region show:

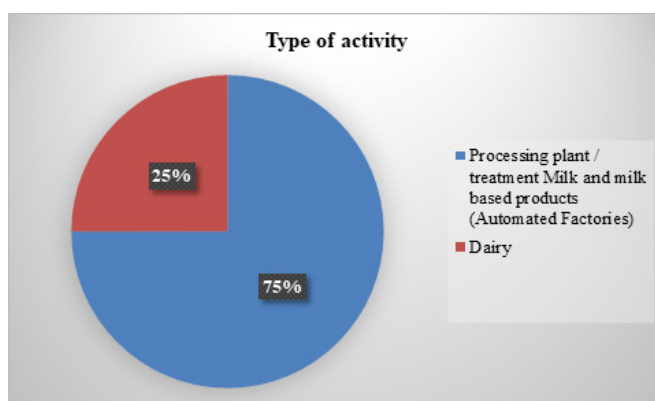
Description	2017	2018	2019
Gjirokastra castle	76.666	113.228	115.353
Protected area	26.344	34.091	52.305

Gjirokastra is a valuable regional tourist destination and many intentional. The purpose of the trips in Gjirokastra region for the year 2018 show:

<i>For business</i>	2.9 %
<i>Visit relatives and friends</i>	57.5%
<i>Holidays and leisure</i>	39.6 %
<i>Total district</i>	100 %

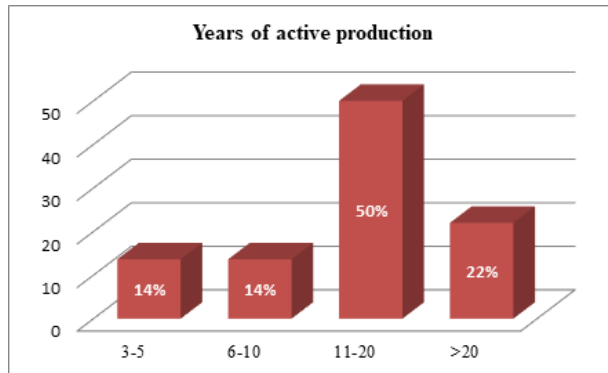
Tourism gives evidenced impact in socio-economic development of district. In this region, have developed also accommodation and food service enterprises. In year 2017, in this region had 582 active accommodation and food service enterprises and in year 2018 had 522 accommodation and food service enterprises.

Considering that the basic product from which cheese derived is milk, the milk processing activity was studied. This activity occupies an important place. From the interviewed producers, 75% of them deal the processing and treatment of milk and milk based products.



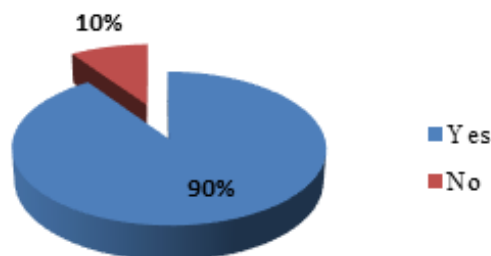
The milk processing for cheese production is one of the activities that engages a significant workforce with this region. Producers process sufficient quantities of milk and produce cheese both to meet the needs of the family and for trade. The study showed that tourists have demands not only for cheese for consumption during their stay in this area, but also for purchases for later consumption. This has led to different ways of trading cheese. The largest part of the interviewed producers, 61% of them sell their products through traders. The other 39% of them sell their products directly to the market.

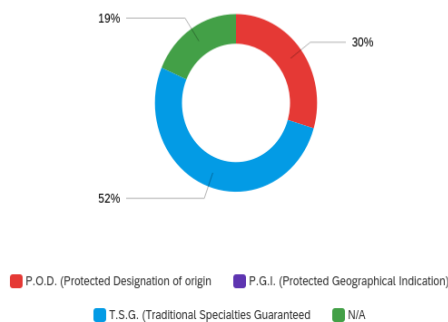
The cheese trading is an activity practiced for a long time. For this the producers have different experiences both in the production and in the trade of cheese. The latter has to do with the active presence of cheese producers in the market. From the analysis it resulted that 50% of the interviewed businesses have around 11-20 years of active production in the market. Only 22% of these businesses have over 20 years of active production. On the other hand a low percentage of 14% respectively have only 3-5 and 6-10 years of active production in the market.



For a sustainable tourist activity, the quality of the products offered, in this case cheese, in restaurants or inns is a focal point for business performance. As the demand for cheese, as a very popular product for tourists, increased as well as to be successful in the market, a considerable number of producers have significantly improved the quality of the product and have certified it with various certificates.. From the analysis of the questionnaires, it results that 90% of the interviewed producers have their production certified as organic and only 2 of the interviewees don't have their production certified as organic. It should be highlighted that the largest part of the interviewed producers have their production certified according to a defined certificate. 52% of the interviewed producers have their production certified as T.S.G (Traditional Specialties Guaranteed) and the other 30% of the producers have their production certified as P.O.D. (Protected Designation of origin). Only 19% of the interviewees have no certifications for their production.

Is your production certified as organic?



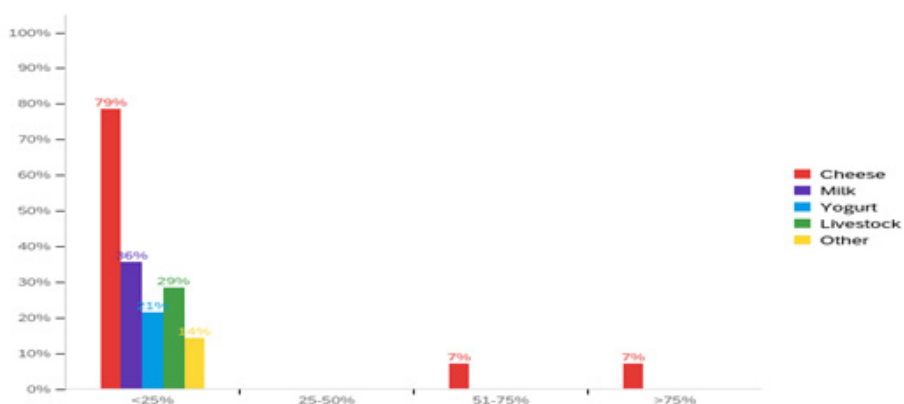


Product certification increases the degree of product safety and customer reliability. Certification opens up prospects for the product not only in the domestic market, but also for export. There are many manufacturers that export.

Only 50% of interviewed producers export their products. Export sizes are different. From the analysis it results that 79% of them export <25% of cheese, 8% export 51-75% of cheese and 7% of them export >75% of cheese production.

36% of them export <25% of the milk product, 21% of them export <25% of the yogurt, 29% of them export <25% of Livestock and 14% of them export <25% of other products. Thus, we can conclude that our producers sell their products not only in domestic market, but they export their products outside Albania.

As it can be seen, milk processors in the Gjirokastra region, in addition to cheese, trade in the domestic market and export other dairy products such as milk, yogurt, etc. as shown in the following graph:



The increase of the range of products for export affects the improvement of the economic conditions of the inhabitants of the region. However, cheese accounts for most of the exported products.

Customer satisfaction puts the manufacturer in front of a series of problems that enable a guaranteed product. In this context, our study also identified a number of important problems. These problems are both the responsibility of local and state level.

According to the analysis of the questionnaires the most important technical problems encountered from the interviewed producers were the problem with vaccinating livestock during production, bad infrastructure, lack of tools for storing milk in stalls, problems with the trade of the products, problems with the sale and the prices of the products. Only a small number of the interviewees had no technical problems.

The most important quality problems encountered from the interviewed producers are the raw product, which is milk, as there are cases when the farmer abuses with the quality of the milk, this directly affects the quality of the cheese, even the equipment are not up to date, also problems with the veterinary care. It should be highlighted that a considerable amount of the interviewees had no problems regarding the quality of the raw products.

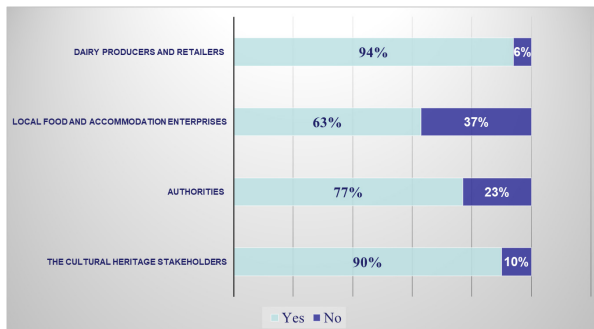
The most important financing problems encountered by the interviewed producers were no financial support and subsidies from the state, it is impossible to participate in Agricultural and Rural Development Agency (ARDA) schemes because there are difficulties in applying, making documents and securing the fund to make the investments in factories.

Regarding the trading problems, the interviewed producers encounter lack of market for the sale of products, the price of the product is decided by traders and not by producers, there are entities that deal with processing the production of cheese and abuse the quality, therefore reduce the price, this directly affects the small producers. Also, the unfair competition in the market causes many difficulties for the producers.

The main problem regarding the sales/pricing problems for the interviewed producers is that the selling price moves very often based on the excessive amount of production while the price of milk remains stagnant, the purchasing power has fallen, the lack of cooperatives to have a unique market price for the products.

Livestock development in the Gjirokastra region has provided strong support for cheese production. Increasing cheese production, continuous quality improvement and certification to a considerable extent of production enables the organization and development of activities at national and international level. In this context, we can also talk about the creation of Cheese CulT Cross Border Cheese, which has been the main problem of this study. For this study showed that for the activity Cheese CulT Cross Border Cheese are interested all structures both production and management of Gjirokastra region. About 77% of the interviewed authorities are interested to support the Cheese CulT Cross Border Cheese Route through:

the organization of cooperation between stakeholders, cheese exhibition and promotion. Organizing of culinary exhibitions and specifically cheese exhibitions are important. The importance of cheese exhibitions is evidenced in the willingness of local producers and companies to get involved in these types of activities.



Most of the interviewed structures consider CheeseCult Cross Border Cheese as an opportunity to benefit in their work as shown in the following graph:

Slide 13 according to Drites

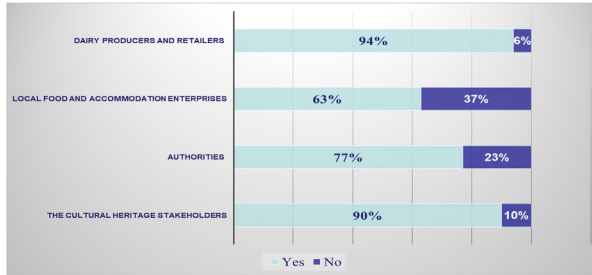
It is understandable that the benefits from the creation of a Cross Border Cheese Route make xxx manufacturers more interested. About 94% of them express a high degree of interest. Relatively less interested are the accommodation structures and xxx. Thus only 63% of them express interest. While 57% of local authorities and cultural heritage stakeholders claim to be interested in the benefits it brings to their work the creation of a Cross Border Cheese Route

The respondents were asked to rate the useful of creation of Cheese Route according to the LIKERT five level scale. Their answers are presented in graph below.



The highest rating for the useful of creation of Cheese Route have dairy producers and retailers with 4.2. While for the accommodation structures have

evaluated with 3.73. Cultural heritage stakeholders have estimated with 4 point, which is understandable as the useful of creation of Cheese Route increases the number of visitors.



The interest to support Cheese Route is huge. According to the analysis, it turns out that the interest rate varies from 63% minimum that refers to local food and accommodation enterprises to 94% maximum that belongs to dairy producers and retailers, as shown in the following graph.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Food tourism has been spreading during the recent decades, both in urban and in rural areas. Food is a key motivation for many trips.
- Local foods, supported by local agriculture can benefit local holistic development and the reason why more and more farmers are developing their business to include tourism and culinary experiences because they see the need to diversify and the consequent financial benefit.
- In the framework of the farmers' markets, everyone is part of the value creation process, from the cheese's artisans to the tourists, and the whole community that expresses its own sense of place by hosting the market. The experience can be even more positive when this cultural and natural landscape is enjoyed together with story-telling which allows in turn to diversify the tourism portfolio of a destination.
- The ancient tradition in dairy and cheese production; the natural / traditional way of production and the small-scale local production that still exists make so special the cheese in Gjirokastra region. Cheese lovers (almost all of us) are prompted to discover local cheeses, visit dairies and important cheese producers and production units.
- The creation and promotion of cheese routes is a good idea in order to attract tourists potentially visiting Gjirokastra region. Created cheese routes should

be complex by focusing on each aspect of tourism that would give travellers a fully satisfying tourist experience. Festivals and regional food products can promote increasing interest, but it should be combined with the promotion, going beyond the region (e.g., nationwide or international). Beside that food tourists are eager to gain knowledge about the culture, architecture, history, handicrafts of the destination and that is the main reason why touristic offer should be complex, it needs to give a feeling of offering a full package that includes quality food samples and related to the destination's historical, cultural and natural attractions combined with interesting sites proposition.

- Gjirokastra regional government departments and agencies responsible for branding and encouraging the tourists to visit a particular place can benefit from global trends in food tourism forecasting growth of tourist interest in local specialties.
- The certified food items clearly stand to be more recognizable among tourists not only domestic but foreign as well and it creates a chance to preserve regional tradition and culture of production. Nowadays, more and more often, people focus not only on product itself but they appreciate the traditional way of production that gives them additional value to the travelling experience.

The present investigation of cheese tourism in Gjirokastra region permits giving several recommendations to potential stakeholders.

- Farmers involved in cheese production should better communicate with the agro-industrial business community in order to facilitate joint development of rural and industrial activities relevant to cheese tourism (e.g., excursions, festivals, etc.).
- Large producers of cheese need to consider opening their enterprise for excursions and receiving the support of cheese festivals to stimulate interest from potential tourists (such activities are also important to their branding).
- The central and local governments of the main cheese-producing regions should think about preparation and successful implementation of special programs/initiatives aimed at cheese tourism promotion (also, as a kind of regional branding) and minimizing their negative effects. In some cases, this can become an efficient tool for rural area development.
- The good idea is to train local chefs in order to give them suggestions how to serve local products in the most attractive way. Additionally food festivals, events accompanied with brochures and leaflets could be a good step to try.

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