

Gastronomy tourism as a tool for the development of regions

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the main activities of gastronomy tourism by illustrating them with examples from Latvia and Lithuania and discusses the significance of gastronomy tourism for the development of the countries' regions. The examples of such activities as food and drink themed events and festivals, gastronomy routes and trails, farm visits and visits of the local restaurants, educations and tastings, museums and thematic exhibitions, excursions to factories and farms, and visiting of local markets are discussed. The benefits of gastronomy tourism, such as the generation of revenue, development of tourism infrastructure, preservation of cultural heritage, dissemination of regional knowledge, creation of positive image and identity, and promotion of community engagement, are identified as important factors for local and regional development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gastronomy tourism has strong connections to rural tourism (agro-tourism), local tourism and slow tourism (Corvo & Maticena, 2018). Various researchers attribute gastronomy tourism to an important part of tourism experience (e.g. Dixit, 2021; Everett, 2016). Food and beverages become an increasingly important tourism attraction (Dixit, 2021; Sorcaru, 2019). Visentin (2011) analysed interrelationships between food, agriculture and tourism. He stressed that interconnected transformation of all these spheres has happened at a time of new technology and innovations (Visentin, 2011). Agriculture provides the products – food and drinks, regions provide culinary traditions (Richards, 2002), delicious meals and natural atmosphere and slowness related to enjoyment and joy, good emotions and respect for the local community and surrounding environment. Long (2004, p. 20) stated that culinary tourism is about food, about “individuals exploring foods new to them as well as using food to explore new cultures and ways of being.”

Gastronomy tourism not only attracts visitors interested in experiencing local cuisine but also creates symbolic power of food as marker of cultural identity (Hille et al., 2013). Gastronomy serves as a unique attracting element for a regional destination, helping it stand

out from other regions and creating a specific niche for travellers interested in culinary experiences. For example, Mediterranean Countries in Europe are renowned for its diverse regional cuisines and attract gastronomy tourists interested in experiencing authentic pasta and pizza in Italy or paella in Spain. Regions and cities brand themselves with food (Berg & Sevón, 2014) trying to create a distinctive and appealing identity in the competitive tourism market.

This article aims to present the key activities of gastronomy tourism, drawing on illustrative examples from Latvia and Lithuania. The article seeks to explore the pivotal role of gastronomy tourism in advancing regional development within these countries. Additionally, the article discusses the perspectives of gastronomic tourism, highlighting its potential to yield substantial benefits for regional development.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2022) highlighted gastronomy tourism as a driver of rural development and rural business. This kind of tourism can add vitality to rural communities, support small, local food producers and promote economic development in regions. An important aspect that specifically arose in the COVID-19 situation is the intention to develop local tourism for the involvement of the country's regions in tourism renewal. A decrease in inbound tourism could accelerate the development of tourism innovations and tourism services in the regions. Culinary traditions usually are preserved in the rural regions. World Tourism Organization also reported on the importance of rural tourism for the renewal of tourism sector (UNWTO, 2020).

Different concepts describing gastronomy tourism (other terms – culinary tourism, gourmet tourism, food travel and food tourism, food and beverage tourism, gastronomic tourism (Dixit, 2021) basically mean the same thing, travel to participate in food or beverage experiences. Gastronomy heritage could include customs, traditions, recipes, dishes, cooking techniques, utensils, cooking stories, unique ingredients, and history (World Food Travel Association, n.d.).

Value chain of gastronomy tourism is strategically essential for the performance of the tourism sector (UNWTO and Basque Culinary Center, 2019). Value chain includes different activities as food production (agriculture, fishing and the food industry), distribution channels (traditional markets, grocers, supermarkets, online commerce, catering places), processing and tasting. Gastronomy tourism is important for regional development and shortening supply chains (Hall & Gössling, 2016). The reconfiguration of traditional supply chains help creates new relationship between consumers and producers and new ways of adding value to the region. Csurgó et al. (2021) stated that gastronomy could be a complementary service to increase the success of tourism development in the region. Researchers are developing new models related to a quality of service. As one of the examples of such models we can identify a model of service excellence, including the concept of customer delight (Klimkeit et al., 2021).

Gastronomy tourism is related to the *Slow Food* and *Slow City* concepts (Heitmann, et al., 2011; Oh et al., 2014; Lowry & Lee, 2016; Clancy, 2018). Slow food concept is related to the evaluation of food preparation, consumption of local and organic food (Corvo & Maticena, 2018). Slow city concept stresses the uniqueness of local lifestyle, attention to environmental protection, balanced development, reduction of traffic, promotion of local traditional events and local gastronomy. As well as slow tourists, representatives of gastronomy tourism respect local culture, history and natural environment.

Gastronomy tourism is also favoured by the concept of *slow time*. Such a concept of time opposes to the fast pace of lifestyle (Howard, 2012). Enjoying time can be viewed as one of the dimensions of slow tourism (Klarin et al., 2023). The gastronomic experience of the region is especially dissonant with speed in life and work environment, a culture of fast food or rapid consumption of knowledge. The essential experiences of slow time can also be related to the admiration of local nature and culture, involvement in the activities of local community, meditation, retreats and hiking. Quality time pass is related to the quality food. Tourists could be happy for these moments, where are they are, without thinking about what will happen later. Time at the tourist destination is spent enjoying, not rushing to the next place. Enjoyment eating local food is related to knowing the local community and its history. Usually, tourists are socially responsible and getting to know, sharing, and connecting with the local community. Gastronomic experience could be complemented by listening to local music, trying local dances or participating in other communal activities. Benefits of such travel approach is deeper knowledge of the local natural and cultural environment, a deep, memorable, unique and authentic experience.

The potential of gastronomy tourism is related to sustainable food consumption in the country's regions. The main EU objectives of the agro-innovations and food technologies for 2014-2020 were related to resource-efficiency, food quality and food safety, bio-based economy, biodiversity and innovative products and services for the integrated supply chain (EIP-Agri, 2020). Slow tourists looking for fresh and healthy local food and want to know how it is produced (Figure 1). Short supply chains directly from farms can contribute to such new market opportunities to area visitors (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2016). In general, the analysis of the relationship of gastronomy and slow tourism should include the ideas of the circular economy and green transformation. A sustainable approach in an economy includes the increase of tourism accessibility and development of the tourism value chain, involving local entrepreneurs, producers and inhabitants. The use of such trends in practice could increase the sustainability and resilience of tourism in general.



Figure 1. Exhibition of local vegetable varieties for educational purposes (Lithuania). Source: Author's photo.

Rural tourism homesteads play a significant role in promoting gastronomy tourism in the Baltic countries. Baltic Country Holidays (2014) published the manual of rural tourism in Latvia. They suggest to enjoy rural holidays staying at country homes, farms, cottages, campings and manor houses. Tourists can get tasty home-made meals from local products, eat fruits and berries grown at the garden, feed and cuddle the farm's animals. The company also helps to organize individual self-drive tours, gastronomy tours for groups, children summer camps, rural tourism and agricultural study tours.

The number of rural tourism homesteads in Lithuania increased from 355 (in 2003) to 668 (in 2017). These homesteads offer visitors a chance to experience the local culture, traditions, and cuisine in an authentic and immersive setting. Rural tourism homesteads are usually established in places of an exceptional landscape, near water bodies. Rural tourism homesteads can usually offer customers a variety of entertainment in the natural environment, e.g. sauna and various bath activities, kayaking tours, canoe rental, food and drink tastings, fishing, cooking and various other education. Some visitors are satisfied with the opportunity to enjoy nature and to get calm recreation, some others require a wider range of services (recreation in nature, cognitive recreation, active leisure, health procedures, opportunity for family celebrations).

Rural tourism has the potential to promote sustainability in gastronomy tourism. Rural tourism homesteads can prioritize local and seasonal ingredients, support organic farming practices, and reduce food waste. By emphasizing sustainable and responsible gastronomy practices, rural tourism promoters can contribute to environmental conservation and raise

awareness about the importance of sustainable food systems. This aligns with the growing demand for sustainable gastronomy experiences and appeals to travelers seeking environmentally conscious tourism options. However, some homesteads are suitable for weddings, corporate parties and other large events. Thus, there is a danger that rural tourism could become a part of party tourism with negative consequences, such as noise, excessive use of alcohol or drugs, and increase in traffic. In general, rural tourism homesteads should aim to maximize the utilization of the area's natural environment and social community in order to promote sustainability (Fang, 2020).

3. METHODS

The Baltic Countries – Lithuania and Latvia – have a long common history, the languages of these countries belong to the family of Baltic languages. Both countries are currently showing various initiatives in the field of gastronomy tourism (e.g. Coff et al., 2020; Zvirbule et al., 2023). Lithuania uses tourism slogan Real is Beautiful and on the country's tourism website <https://www.lithuania.travel/en/> pays great attention to culinary and gastronomy. Here you can find descriptions of Lithuanian national cuisine, culinary traditions and experiences, traditional holiday table, peculiarities of the cuisine in regions. More attention is paid to such traditional products as honey, tree cake (šakotis), black bread, apple cheese, special sausage (skilandis), and cottage cheese. Cold beetroot soup (pink soup) and potato dumplings shaped like zeppelins and stuffed with meat, curd or mushrooms are considered traditional national Lithuanian dishes (Lithuania Travel, n.d.).

Latvia uses tourism slogan Magnetic Latvia and also dedicated a separate section to the gastronomy on the country's tourism website <https://www.latvia.travel/en> The website encourages tourists to enjoy flavours symbolizing Latvia such as birch juice, cold beetroot soup, Līgo or Jāņi cheese, quince, chanterelles, grey peas, and candies "Gotina." Gastronomy tourism is associated with nature (e.g. picking mushrooms and berries), short supply chains from the fields to the marketplace, home and countryside restaurants and other places of fine dining (latvia.travel, 2022a).

According to Dixit (2021) the gastronomy tourism research could be divided into a consumer, a producer, and a destination development perspective. This article analyses gastronomy tourism in the context of the destination (regional) development. The impact of the gastronomy tourism to the regional development is analysed using various examples from Latvia and Lithuania. The main research method is analysis of primary (e.g. EU and national governmental documents, research articles) and secondary informational sources (e.g. promotional brochures). A lot of information is provided in the internet websites of tourism service providers. This research method takes the form of a qualitative systematic review, referring to the academic tourism literature.

A systematic review involved a comprehensive, and structured analysis of a research question related to the gastronomy and development of regions. When it comes to internet sources it involved a meticulous process to identify and assess relevant online materials. Specific keywords related to the activities of gastronomy tourism were used to identify relevant internet sources. Another step was screening process of the identified sources

based on the research aim. One more step was related to assessment of quality and reliability of the sources. Usually, the identified information was double checked. This was important for ensuring that the information used for analysis is trustworthy. The final step was synthesis of findings from the selected internet sources. This helped to identify patterns and generalize them. The chosen research method reveals a wide range of activities related to gastronomy tourism.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Hjalager (2002) tried to systematize important driving forces and barriers to the creation of gastronomy tourism. The vertical gastronomy tourism development related to the restricting of the gastronomic food experience, establishing marketing routes, visitors' centres and museums, creating events based on food and tourism, organization of cooking classes and cooking holidays (Hjalager, 2002). Dixit (2021) discussed about such forms of gastronomy tourism as food and drink themed events and festivals, food and drink markets, tastings and national types of eating, visits to working farms, cooking classes and stay at food themed hotels/resorts.

Taking into account these discussions, the author of this article suggests eight key activities closely linked to gastronomy tourism. The greatest impetus to the regional economy is such actions of gastronomy tourism as food and drink themed events and festivals, gastronomy routes and trails, farm visits and visits of the local restaurants, educations and tastings and markets in the regions (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Activities related to the Gastronomy Tourism. Source: Own elaboration (2022).

Let's take a closer look at these activities using examples from Lithuania and Latvia.

4.1 Food and drink themed events and festivals

Different events in rural areas could be regarded as the gastronomy tourism event. In Lithuania they are specially organized in the regions (**Table 1**).

Name of the event	Location	Main attributes
Cherry Festival of Žagarė	Žagarė (Joniškis district)	Presentation of local crafts, concerts, art expositions, traditional market, cultural and sport events, educations and lectures, installation of recreation spaces, Holy Mass at the Church, decoration of local houses by scarecrows
Cheese festival	Druskininkai	Demonstrations of cheese production, tastings, competitions, the election of favourite cheese, workshops, lectures, concerts
Festival of Honey collection	Stripeikiai Beekeeping Museum (Ignalina district)	Presentation of local crafts and folk art, creative workshops, market of bee products, reconstruction of crafts, educations, excursions in the nature, lectures, watching movies, tastings, concerts
Smelt festival	Palanga	Tastings of prepared smelt in different recipes, fishing and fisherman's competitions, bathing in the sea, concerts, barbecue championship, fair, artistic performances,
Harvest festivals	Various places	Fair, concerts, various exhibitions, educations, competitions, festive procession, Holy Mass at the Church, presentation of various delicacies, presentation of various awards

Table 1. Events of Gastronomy Tourism in Lithuania. Source: Own elaboration (2022).

The mission of the Cherry festival of Žagarė is to commemorate and promote the cherries of Žagarė, to encourage local people and compatriots not to lose the historical and cultural memory, traditions, and patriotism, and to develop the culture of northern Lithuania, the former territory of the Žemgalians (Žagarės vyšnių festivalis, 2022). According organizers of the Cherry Festival, the festival traditionally lasted four days in 2022. The festival was characterized by the variety of events. The local people of Žagarė had decorated their homesteads and various spaces of the city with scarecrows, which help to scare skylarks away from the cherry tries, and also give the festival and the town a kind of charisma. From 2019 during the events in the Joniškis district, disposable plastic dishes were not allowed to use. Festival guests had the opportunity to purchase newly made glasses with images of cherries (Žagarės vyšnių festivalis, 2022).

The Cheese Festival traditionally organized in August in Druskininkai (Lithuania). The cheese producers from Lithuania, Latvia and Poland usually participate. During the festival, demonstration of cheese production, tastings and various competitions take place. Usually,

festival bring together small-scale cheese makers to share the flavours of cheese with cheese eaters and tasters (Druskininkai, 2022).

Every year in the Beekeeping Museum, Stripeikiai village (Ignalina district, Lithuania) there is celebration of the end of honey collection. The 2022 program included such educations as dyeing from plants education, decoration of gingerbread, stump hive carving, writing on wax letters and making stamps, silk painting, demonstration of mead the preparation of mead drink and tasting, tying sculptures from grass and hive weaving, moulding a clay bee, weaving ribbons, weaving bracelets, tasting herbal teas, making straw gardens and others (Senovinės Bitininkystės Muziejus, 2022).

Smelt (small fish) festival usually organised during the winter period in the Baltic coast. Fishing and tasting this fish with a cucumber smell is a long-lasting tradition in Lithuania. Crowds of joyful visitors are attracted by the traditional Palanga Smelt Festival with its scent of cucumber. The date of this festival usually is in February, because the smelt is caught in Lithuania only once a year when it arrives to spawn in the coastal waters of the Baltic Sea. Seaside fishermen unanimously agree that the smelt is delicious only when fresh and when caught before spawning (Amber Journey, 2018). Smelt preparation recipes includes battered and fried smelt, dried, smoked, marinated or grilled fish, and fish soup.

The harvest festival in some regions is the biggest and most awaited festival of the year, where different representatives of all the region, including farmers, artisans, and folk artists come together. A characteristic part of the festival is a concert and a fair of various products.

4.2. Gastronomy routes and trails

Noticing the interest in gastronomic tourism, a number of initiatives regarding various routes were born. Most of such initiatives were supported by EU funds. One of them is EU project “Flavours of Livonia” (2017-2020), which identified 250 rural restaurants, guest houses and producing farms in Latvia and Estonia. The project was related to the food history and the impact of Livonian times on the contemporary cuisine of today (Flavours of Livonia, 2020). Gourmet touring routes proposed by the project partners included travel itineraries in different regions. The duration of the routes was from 2 to 12 days, self-drive and bus tours also had some elements of hiking, cycling and boating.

The aim of another EU project in Latvia “Rye Road: a Product of Culinary Tourism” was to create and promote the Rye Road, a culinary tourism product of national significance, based on the rye bread and rye product traditions. The Rye Road project invites tourists to visit rural entrepreneurs who make rye bread, using traditional or family recipes, or various dishes from rye bread or rye flour. The hosts usually show visitors how bread is made, offer master classes on baking bread and cooking rye dishes (Baltic Country Holidays, n.d.). The Rye Road map presents 52 members of the route who are open to visitors: farms, home producers, guest houses, small bakeries and bakery shops, country cafes, restaurants and pubs.

Lithuania provides a fascinating illustration of gastronomic travel. The public institution “Aukštaitija narrow-gauge railway” presented a gastronomic tour on a cultural heritage

train in November 2023. The train ran from the narrow-gauge railway station of fifth largest Lithuanian city Panevėžys to Anykščiai, stopping at Troškūnai, Anykščiai and Surdegis stations offering culinary heritage experiences to passengers (Rudys, 2023). Travellers of this journey were invited to taste exceptional dishes, desserts and drinks. At the Panevėžys depot, there was a tasting of the *Čičinskas steak*, which is characteristic for this region. Passengers also enjoyed various snacks and desserts at different stations. By doing so, tourists familiarized themselves with the historical and cultural heritage of the narrow-gauge railway, tasting the traditional local cuisine (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Passengers on the gastronomy train tour going to Troškūnai train station to taste local dishes.
Source: Author's photo.

4.3. Farm visits to contribute to food production

Some berry farms in Lithuania offer opportunity to pick berries for yourself. Some customers even drive as much as 200-300 kilometres for this opportunity (Mykoliaitytė, 2021). People of all ages use this opportunity. Usually if tourists plan to see the attractions of that region, they also visit such farms. One of such farms announces this opportunity as the unique attraction in the months of July and August. During the promotion "Pick the blueberries yourself" the tourists can come to the blueberry orchard, browse to pick or to buy blueberries. Before going to pick berries, the farmers will weigh the basket, bucket or

other container of tourist (it can be bought locally). After picking the blueberries, the organizers weigh the berries and calculate the price per kilogram. If someone don't have time to pick, he or she can buy fresh berries locally in wooden baskets (Jūsų Sodui, 2022).

Some cafes offer to catch your own fish in Lithuania. The restaurant “The Fishermen House” dislocated in the rural area was established in 2000. This is the place in Lithuania where the tourists can catch trouts in large ponds. After catching a fish tourists will be able to see how professional cooks make various dishes of the fish caught by them, following the recipes of forefathers (Žvejų namai, n.d.). The website of the restaurant announces that “even the mostly fastidious gourmands will not be disappointed with the dish, and vine served together will complete the unrepeatable taste to which nothing can compare. What can be better than a fresh, just fried fish and a vine of high quality?” (Žvejų namai, n.d.). Collecting food ingredients could be combined with the participation in the local harvest feasts. Tasting sessions can also take place in the local farms.

4.4. Visiting local restaurants

Visiting local restaurants is one of the most popular tourist activities. Latvia in the promotional leaflet “Food lover’s guide. To the Riga-Gauja region” presents more than 20 various restaurants located in Riga, Sigulda, Valmiera and Cesis. Usually the menu in such restaurants depends on the season and local fresh products and it is influenced by the local cooking traditions (Enter Gauja, n.d.).

In the presentations of local restaurants, it is usually emphasized such elements as variety of local food (“The menu of a restaurant is based on rural products only supplied by local farms. The menu is constantly changed according to the seasonal offer of farmers”), authenticity (“the restaurant’s menu will be an enjoyment for everyone looking for an authentic local food”), service and environment (“Food served not only on plates, but also on wood, ceramics, stones and other natural materials”, “interior takes diners back to the Middle Ages”) (Enter Gauja, n.d.).

4.5. Museums and thematic exhibitions

Food and drink museums often also present products that reflect the name of the museum. Some of the most popular are chocolate museums. The chocolate museum operates in the candy factory Rūta in Šiauliai city, Lithuania. Rūta is the oldest operating candy factory in Lithuania established in 1913. Currently, it offers a wide range of confectionery products, such as chocolates with various types of filling, dragées, whipped cream and jelly candies, chocolate truffles, chocolate sculptures, as well as sugar-free, organic, heritage and other products (Šokolado muziejus, 2012). The Chocolate Museum is located in a factory. It invites tourists to take a look at nearly four millennia-long history of chocolate, and to learn how the chocolate was made by the Maya and Aztec peoples, and how chocolate and its consuming traditions have changed since then (Šokolado muziejus, 2012).

The Tree cake museum is dislocated in Jaskonys village in Lithuania. This is the first one and only of this kind in the world. There tourists can enjoy seeing a unique tree cake included in Guinness World Records. This tree cake is 3 m 72 cm tall and it weighs almost 86 kilos. The

museum also exhibits analogues of Lithuanian tree cake which are baked in foreign countries: Hungary, Sweden, Japan, Poland and others. During the excursion the tourists can learn about differences between Lithuanian tree cake and that baked abroad. The exhibition also displays a mobile furnace of baking tree cakes that is used in go-away educational programmes (Romnesa, 2022).

Lithuanian Culinary Museum is dislocated in the capital city of Lithuania – Vilnius. Visitors can explore a wide variety of subject areas linked to culinary traditions, dining and tableware habits throughout different times (Lithuanian Culinary Museum, 2018). Araiši windmill in Latvia shows how grain was milled back in the middle of the 19th century. Tourists can try different grades of flour and enjoy a classic miller’s lunch – barley -flour porridge with a meaty gravy (Enter Gauja, n.d.).

4.6. Educations and tastings

Various tastings and educations are especially popular in rural areas. Educations could include and such actions as food preparation with locals and cooking workshops (Figure 4). Tastings are especially popular in regional wineries, breweries, milk processing companies, where could be organized food and drink tasting sessions of wines, beers, or cheeses.



Figure 4. Cooking Workshop in Riga. Preparation of Desserts. Source: Author's photo.

One of the interesting elements of the Karaite culinary heritage is kybyn (kibinas, kybynlar). It is a leavened paste cake having the form of half-moon and the lamb or beef filling (Kybynlar, 2022). It is baked in the oven. Karaites have the culinary legacy in Lithuania for 600 years. At the educational program, tourists can learn the history of the appearance of kybynlar and to learn how to make and spin kybynlar according to a special national heritage recipe. After the education, the tourists can taste the kybynlar of their own production.

Valmiera Museum in Latvia offers visitors three educational programmes. First one is related to the bread produce, second presents the role of dairy products in Latvia and the third explains how medical herbs and spices and garden plants are utilised in cooking, including tasting them both fresh and in teas (Enter Gauja, n.d.).

4.7. Excursions to factories and farms

Aldaris Beer Museum is located in the Aldaris brewery in Riga. It is the first of its kind in Latvia and the most modern in the Baltics. It displays the collection of historic exhibits related to beer and introduce to the visitors the four basic elements of beer – water, hops, malt and yeast. The interior of the museum stresses the historic evidences and boasts the authentic brewing hall, which has been kept untouched since 1938 (latvia.travel, 2022b). Visits to breweries are often combined with tastings held there.

Kietaviškiu greenhouses in Lithuania organize excursions for tourists from time to time (Figure 5). People from all over Lithuania travel to free night excursions in the Kietaviškiu greenhouses. Travelers are led through the mysterious dark corridors of the greenhouses before entering a real wintering summer. During this night expedition, the tourists not only see how Lithuanian vegetables are grown in winter, but also hear mysterious stories about what happens in the greenhouses when all the workers go home (Delfi, 2020). According to the organizers, such excursions is like a social-educational project that tells not only about the modern technology that allows to grow vegetables all year round, but also about the 30-year history of this region of Lithuania. It was decided to build greenhouses in this area more than 30 years ago because of the nearby Elektrėnai power plant. In order to rationally use the excess heat, it was planned to build greenhouses in the neighbouring village. The power plant and the greenhouses provided work for the residents of the surrounding villages and towns - men worked mostly in the power plant, and women in the greenhouses (Delfi, 2020).



Figure 5. Excursion at the Kietaviskiu greenhouse. Source: Author's photo.

4.8. Markets

Often people go to markets to buy fresh food and some products that they would not find in stores. Farmers and food suppliers also often come to big cities to sell their products. Riga central market and Vilnius Kalvariju market are the biggest food markets in Latvia and Lithuania. Straupe rural goods market in Latvia is based on slow food philosophy. The products are local, seasonal, safe and healthy, they are grown keeping in mind the ecological sustainability (Enter Gauja, n.d.).

In the northern part of Vilnius, near Ukmergės street, Benediktas market was established in 2018. Here, under one roof, Lithuanian farmers and sellers of gourmet products trade in a friendly manner (Made in Vilnius, 2019). Benediktas Market is special in that there are also food restaurants of various cuisines located next to the vendors, so after shopping, tourists can also eat in the same place. Benediktas Market promote themselves as a space “that connects local and overseas food traditions under one roof, where you can communicate, share, and most importantly, enjoy and taste real food” (Benedikto Market, 2019).

5. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS. GASTRONOMY TOURISM BENEFITS FOR THE REGIONS

Zaleckienė & Turčinskaitė (2019) pointed out that the tourism development contributes to the vitality of rural areas, tourism increases employment opportunities for residents, promotes the development of relations among different business entities and increases attractiveness of rural environment. The additional benefits of gastronomy tourism in regions related to cultural preservations, destination branding and community engagement. Richards (2002) noticed that destination marketing through gastronomy also brings various benefits including boosting local agriculture, enhancing food processing and retail sectors, elevating food quality, and fortifying the local image and identity.

The examples presented at section 4 show that that gastronomy tourism has a positive effect on the economic development of regions. First of all, it affects development of regional infrastructure and service sector. Development of tourist infrastructure is related to the new opportunities for businesses – accommodation, catering, souvenir production, various other services and new job openings. So, gastronomy tourism can contribute to local economies by generating revenue and creating job opportunities. Additionally, it can foster entrepreneurship and support the development of small-scale food businesses. Overall, the consumption of tourism services and products has a significant impact on the region's economy and contributes to the well-being of its residents.

Gastronomy routes have a great potential. The longer the time tourists spend in the region, the greater the benefit for the region. Of course, tourists who travel on foot or by bicycle will spend more time in the region (especially during the gastronomy routes). Travelers spending more time in the region are likely to spend more money as well. However, it is important to pay attention to marketing of possible routes, emphasizing their uniqueness and distinctiveness. Publicity of such routes could include history and legends, symbols, and advertisement of a special events.

Gastronomy tourism can help preserve local culinary traditions and cultural heritage. By promoting traditional dishes and cooking techniques, it encourages communities to retain their authentic culinary practices. This can lead to increased pride in local food culture and a sense of identity among residents. Gastronomy tourism often involves close interactions between travelers and local communities. This engagement can result in cultural exchange, improved understanding, and appreciation of local traditions and customs. It offers opportunities for locals to showcase their culinary skills, share their stories, and actively participate in tourism activities.

Gastronomy tourism also could help to form the positive image and identity of the region. Usually, such trips form the image of the region favourable to tourism. Tourists don't just spend money; they also get to know the region and its history. It is also opportunity for local communities to present their lifestyle and crafts. Sometimes gastronomy tourism provides the opportunity for the better use of local resources: tourists stay in private houses, apartments or farmhouses. There is no doubt that gastronomy tourism also contributes to the main attractions of travelling, such as getting to know a new way of life, new authentic experiences, new social connections and satisfaction of social needs.

Gastronomy tourism provides a unique selling point for destinations. It helps differentiate them from competitors and creates a distinct image in the minds of travelers. A strong gastronomy tourism offering can attract visitors, boost tourism numbers, and position a region as a food destination. Travelers are interested not only in the flavors but also in the stories behind the food. Gastronomy tourism is increasingly incorporating storytelling elements to showcase the regional history, cultural significance, and personal narratives associated with local identity. This adds depth and authenticity to the overall experience.

Developing the necessary skills and capacities within local communities is crucial for them to actively participate and benefit from gastronomy tourism. Training programs, workshops, and educational initiatives can help enhance culinary skills, entrepreneurship,

and hospitality services, enabling locals to engage in the tourism value chain effectively. Local communities could also be engaged on cooking classes, farm-to-table experiences, food tours, and organization of local food festivals. The focus is shifting from passive consumption to active engagement and learning. Another important factor is strengthened cooperation among various institutions (local communities, business entities, and local government). It is important to involve local communities and as many stakeholders as possible in the initiatives related to gastronomy tourism. Communities understand that gastronomy tourism could help to actualize the other natural and cultural tourist resources of the region and to help to find out a new tourist resource.

So, gastronomy tourism has the potential to significantly impact local and regional development. It can bring economic benefits, preserve cultural heritage, enhance destination branding, and promote community engagement (Table 2).

Gastronomy tourism	Development of tourism infrastructure
	Additional revenue
	Preservation of cultural heritage
	Dissemination of the knowledge about the region
	Positive image and identity
	Promotion of community engagement

Table 2. Benefit of Gastronomy Tourism. Source: Own elaboration (2022).

6. CONCLUSION

Gastronomy tourism have a significant impact on regional economies and brings different opportunities for tourism development in the regions. Gastronomy tourism related to the concepts of sustainable and slow tourism, and the cognition of natural and cultural heritage in synergy with the new services and the new quality products. Regions aim to support the development of gastronomy tourism by organizing events that promote traditions, cultures, and local cuisine, with the objective of attracting as many tourists as possible. Gastronomy tourism involves different regional stakeholders as farmers, processors, local restaurants, retail establishments, accommodation and other tourism service providers, local administrations and visitors. Such multi-stakeholder’s involvement is essential to the management of the gastronomy tourism.

Culinary heritage and gastronomy are important tourism resources having ability to generate the tourism development in regions. Gastronomy routes provide an opportunity to spend more time and to do different things what the tourists want in the administrative unit of the visited place. Activities related to gastronomy tourism include participation at different events, different visits, educations and tastings. Sometimes, gastronomy tourism offers additional work opportunities for tourists during the trip. Additional research is needed to analyse the negative impact of gastronomy tourism, such as commercialisation of culinary heritage, the impact of big parties or excessive food and drink consumption.

Travelers are increasingly seeking authentic or innovative culinary experiences. It is necessary to evaluate the current trends of gastronomy tourism, which have the potential in regions. After analyzing pop-up dining experiences, Taylor et al. (2018) noticed that people are interested in an exciting dining atmosphere and enjoyable moments while also seeking to maintain great service. Pire (2023) discusses the main trends of experiential dining. This dining experience goes beyond traditional restaurant settings and includes unique environment and location (such as farms, vineyards, Ferris wheel, dinner in the sky or even underwater restaurants), special sensations (dining in the dark, multisensory dining), live entertainment (live shows, live music, dinner theatres, game and arcade restaurants) or special tableside service (storytelling elements). Interactive cooking classes and food tours where participants can engage in food preparation and learn about local ingredients are also on the rise. Another trend in gastronomy tourism is the emergence of secret bars, also known as speakeasy bars. To gain entry to these establishments, one typically needs to have a connection with someone who already has permission or knows the location of the top-secret party.

Another important trend that will only increase in the future is sustainable gastronomy (Lochman, 2021; Richardson & Fernqvist, 2022). There is a growing emphasis on sustainable and ethical practices in gastronomy tourism. Travelers are increasingly concerned about the environmental and social impacts of their food choices. Sustainable gastronomy practices, such as farm-to-table dining, organic farming, and reducing food waste, are gaining momentum in the gastronomy tourism sector. Sustainable practices also include responsible sourcing of ingredients and supporting local producers. Maintaining a balance between tourism demand and the availability of local resources is a challenge that needs to be addressed. However, regions that prioritize sustainability are seen as more attractive to such travelers (Streimikiene et al., 2021).

In conclusion, gastronomy tourism continues to evolve with various unique activities and new trends. The gastronomic dimension of travel remains a crucial factor in influencing destination selection and overall travel satisfaction. The focus is on fostering a deeper connection between travelers and the local gastronomic culture. The examples of gastronomic tourism in Lithuania and Latvia discussed in this article give an idea of gastronomy as a tool for regional development.

Research limitations of this article was a geographical scope and the challenge of generalizing findings. The examples were taken only from two countries – Latvia and Lithuania. However, gastronomy tourism development may vary significantly from one region to another. This limitation was related to acknowledgement of challenge of generalizing findings to a broader context, as the success factors in development of regions may be context-specific and influenced by unique regional characteristics. Suggestion for future research could be related to exploration the role of technological innovations in gastronomy and innovations of the promotion of gastronomic experiences (such as gastronomic trips on local train tours) and their impact on attracting visitors to specific regions.

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