

# CHARACTERISTICS OF TRADITIONAL FOOD – THE VIEWPOINT OF THE TOURISM BUSINESS

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ABSTRACT

The growing popularity of alternative forms of tourism and the increasing importance of unique characteristics and special atmosphere has drawn the attention to traditional foods. The latter have been studied in terms of nutrition qualities, potential for achieving sustainable development and benefits for local communities; customer perceptions have also been in the spotlight. There has been, however no evidence yet of how the tourism businesses perceive traditional foods and of the most important aspects of this specific product. The purpose of this study is to assess the perception of traditional food and the importance they lay on its main characteristics. Location of the study: The study was conducted among 34 hotel and restaurant managers in South western Bulgaria using an on-line questionnaire sent to a total number of 120 hotels with restaurants at this location. Results and implication: The most important characteristics of "traditional food" perceived by respondents are popularity within a certain region, authentic way of cooking, relatively long and real history of consumption and production. Persistent high quality, safety, healthiness and good taste are the qualities that restaurateurs are trying to provide. There is also evidence of tourism businesses not been aware of the importance of using ecologically clean local produce. Conclusion: Despite the small scale of this study on traditional foods and the way they are perceived by managers in tourism, results are informative and relevant to those in many European countries and could be used for implementation in the tourist business.

## Introduction

In recent years there has been a clear shift in tourism demand from material expressions of culture to more intangible aspects such as atmosphere, lifestyles, creativity and identity of the host communities (Richards, 2008). Local culture is seen as a main driver for tourism development and a source of competitive advantage, having the potential to form a unique selling proposition. On a global scale along with the demand for traditional tourist

products, there is an evident increase of customer demand for alternative forms of tourism based on local culture (Kyurova et al., 2012). Traditional food is one of its most attractive elements as far as tourism is concerned, as it can not only be the main attractor for special interest tourism (gourmet or culinary tourism), but it also adds to the special and authentic character of the place. Moreover, companies providing gastronomic services are seen as one of the main sectors in the tourism industry (Panasiuk, 2014). Traditional food is a complex, not well-defined and sometimes very controversial concept, related to specific cultural identity, historic period and heritage. Culinary traditions are often passed down along a familial and historically material line with each new generation learning the recipes, eating habits and tastes of their ancestors. Culinary traditions reproduce culture and are combined with the regional specificity. In the striving to present national culture as something unique and externally bounded, culinary traditions have gained powerful symbolic value; national dishes not only serve as the expression of the national spirit, but the very substance with which the national spirit is fed.

Sometimes relatively "new" foods and dishes are perceived as traditional because of their popularity and presentation as such. A very limited attempt has been made to define the concept of traditional food. One of the definitions describes it as "a coherent tradition of food preparation that rises from the daily lives and kitchens of a people over an extended period in a specific region of a country, or a specific country, and which, when localized, has notable distinctions from the cuisine of the country as a whole." (The American Food Revolution: Cuisines in America). Drawing from this definition, the concept seems to be based on three main pillars: sustainable continuity in time, rootedness in the everyday life of a community, and distinctiveness. The term is often used interchangeably with local food, though the latter rather focuses on origin of produce, usually limited in terms of geographical distance (e.g. grown or raised within 50 km) or administratively (produced within the boundaries of the same administrative unit, usually a district).

Most of the definitions are designed from a food/nutrition expert's perspective, while the interpretation from the restaurateur's point of view is missing. Yet, a definition where tourism manager's perceptions and beliefs towards TF are revealed, together with the expected benefits from these products, can be very relevant from a food-marketing and restaurant point of view, especially given that traditional food represents a growing segment of interest, as well as a segment with considerable relevance to agricultural, local food production and tourism. In this regional representative survey from South Western Bulgaria, a manager-driven definition of the concept of 'traditional foods' will be presented, together with a discussion on the image of traditional foods compared to consumer opinion in several European countries.

## Literature review

The link between food and tourism has long been in the focus of scientific literature. A number of studies report the significance of food for tourism development. It is often ranked first in visitor spending (Wolf, 2006); in a New Zealand survey dining out when on holiday was identified as the most important activity by more than half of the respondents (Statistics New Zealand, 2007). Food experiences are thought to stimulate local development by contributing to lower seasonality, creating new jobs and preserving traditions (Richards, 2014). In her study on food and authenticity (Sims, 2009), Sims directly links local food to visitor experience and the quest for authenticity, claiming that it contributes to a closer relation with the destination culture and identity. The search for authentic traditional cuisine is often explained by nostalgia, feeling of insecurity in a quickly changing world, interest in heritage (Richards, 2002).

Numerous studies concerning tourist's perceptions of traditional foods and the factors influencing customer satisfaction have also been conducted. Some of them are focused on a single product (Sanzo et al., 2003; Kim and Yim, 2014), others make comparison between traditional and fast food restaurants (Halim et al., 2005), or explore the concerns of international tourists towards local cuisine (Amuquandoh, 2011). There is also some research on the perceptions of local people and the relationship between their expectations and the attitudes to changes of traditional products (Purcărea et al., 2013).

A lot of attention is paid to the innovations in food products and how these influence traditional foods and to what extent consumers would accept this trend. In general, findings indicate broad acceptance both by the food sector and consumers, although the preservation of the traditional character of local foods is seen as very important (Kuhne et al., 2010).

Traditional food has also been a subject of research in sociology. In his article on traditional food as a tourist resort in rural areas Bessiere defines four main dimensions of the concept: food as a symbol, food as a sign of communion, food as a class marker and food as an emblem, emphasizing that "man feeds on nutrients but also on signs, symbols, dreams and on imagination" (Bessiere, 2002). Local food is hence seen as something more than a nutrient; it is rather a medium for entering "a social universe and a cultural order" (Bessiere, 2002). A serious issue raised in the article concerns the relation between tradition and modernity, whose interplay shape culinary heritage.

Defining traditional foods has been the subject of several studies, usually consumer-centered ones. In qualitative study conducted in six European countries, four main dimensions of the traditional food concept were identified: habit-natural, origin-locality, processing-elaboration and sensory properties (Guererro et al., 2009). While building on the findings of previous studies, the present paper explores the concept of traditional food through a less common perspective – the one of the tourist businesses.

## Research methods

Research design and study area: An on-line survey was conducted on 120 operating hotels with restaurants from Southwestern Bulgaria. To assess the understanding and feeling about traditional foods of the managerial staff a two-stage sampling procedure was applied: at the first stage a selection of leading Bulgarian tour operators with a comprehensive database of hotels in Bulgaria – Astral Holidays, Bulgaria Holiday and Sunny Tours, were identified in order to form a sample of all operating hotels and restaurants in Southwestern Bulgaria and actually doing business with these tour operators (based on actual offers and comparative analysis); at the second stage a list of 120 operating 3, 4, or 5-star hotels in Southwest Bulgaria were extracted from the internet sites of the above mentioned three tour operators and a contact information was obtained for each of the hotels. The identified 120 hotels represent the comprehensive number of hotels in the area. An online questionnaire to each of the selected potential respondents was sent.

Population and sample size: The population includes a total number of 120 hotels with restaurants in Southwest Bulgaria. They were all included in the study. The response rate was 28.3%.

For the purpose of study a specific questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire aims to assess the level of knowledge and awareness about nutrition including perception of traditional foods and consists of 52 questions divided into three groups – healthy eating, healthy foods and traditional foods. In the current publication only the third group of questions (the ones related to traditional foods) are analyzed and presented. The questionnaire was developed based on a comprehensive literature review and dietary guidelines and taken from a validated existing

questionnaires for general nutrition knowledge assessment of adult population. The questionnaire was piloted to two groups – fourth year students in tourism and lecturers in tourism to assess item difficulty and consistency. The version of the final questionnaire was transformed in electronic style for an online survey. A 5-rank scale was used with the following discriminative criteria: 1 – totally disagrees; 2 – somewhat disagree; 3 – neutral; 4 – somewhat agree; 5 – totally agree. Interviews were conducted in March–April 2014.

Data analyses: The survey results were statistically processed with SPSS, version 10, and are presented as mean values of statement, standard error and standard deviation of positive answers.

## Research findings and discussion

Thirty four out of the 120 questionnaires sent to the exhaustive list of hotels with food-serving establishments were adequately completed and returned and accordingly the response rate of the study was 28.3%. Table 1 represents the profile of respondents, based on gender, age and professional status.

**Table 1.** Profile of respondents

	Number (n)	Share (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
men	27	80
women	7	20
<b>Age bracket (years)</b>		
18–24	4	12
25–34	15	44
35–44	9	26
45–54	6	18
<b>Position</b>		
Top-level manager	12	35
Middle-level manager	10	29
Employee	8	24
No answer	4	12

Source: author's research.

One of the modules in the questionnaire was designed with the specific aim of identifying the perceptions of tourism managers as far as traditional food is concerned. Table 2 presents the importance that respondents lay on certain characteristics of traditional food.

The working definition, obtained from the qualitative pre-study, was largely confirmed in this quantitative study. Managers in tourism seemed to define traditional foods as “well-known” foods and popular for a particular territory, ones that are cooked in authentic way, consumed by “our grandparents” and with “specific sensory properties”. Conversely, traditional foods were less strongly associated with being “natural and low-processed” and being “consumed on special occasions” or “has a local importance”. It is interesting that the ranking of statement of tourist managers are similar to consumer’s perception in several European countries (Weichselbaum et al., 2009). In some countries like Poland, and to a lower extent in Italy, France and Spain, consumers were found to associate “specific sensory properties” significantly more with traditional foods than in Belgium and Norway (Demetri and Nascimbeni, 2008). In our study the sensory properties are in the middle of the ranking scale but are more associated with the

specific territory, authentic way of cooking and history. The characteristics like “eaten on special occasions” and “contain a story” is less pronounced in Bulgaria compared to countries like Poland.

**Table 2.** Mean values on the statements considered for the definition of the concept of TF (5-point scale) by managers in tourism from Southwest Bulgaria

What do you think traditional food is?	N	Mean	Standard error	Standard deviation
Well-known and typical of a particular region or territory	33	4.758	0.087	0.502
Authentic way of cooking	31	4.000	0.161	0.894
Has a real history	31	3.871	0.184	1.024
Consumed since the time of our grandparents	32	3.844	0.196	1.110
Has local importance	32	3.625	0.178	1.008
Prepared according to an old recipe from my grandmother	32	3.594	0.205	1.160
Specific sensory properties	32	3.281	0.216	1.224
Authentic origin of raw material	32	3.250	0.225	1.270
Consumed on special occasions	32	3.125	0.257	1.454
Consumed frequently	33	2.970	0.192	1.104
Natural and as low processed as possible	32	2.813	0.226	1.281
Dependent on the season	32	2.531	0.246	1.391

Source: author’s research.

It is noteworthy that the values of “authentic origin of raw materials” and “dependent on the season” are relatively low. This is in direct contradiction to most definitions of traditional food, which indicate the origin of the products as its important characteristics. Moreover, the result shows that the relationship between local producers and restaurateurs is not at the required level – buying from major supermarket chains is preferred, which does not help the local community. Local origin of the produce is also closely connected with the “seasonality” characteristic. Some traditional foods have highly pronounced seasonality due to the fact that the raw materials necessary for their preparation are available only in certain periods of the year.

A proper understanding of the terminology of traditional foods is important for the managers working in the field of tourism as food/nutrition is the key mode of communication. The EU has created product designations that are linked to geographical origin or traditional production methods. Therefore, in 1992, the EU created systems to promote and protect valuable food names; these systems were updated and improved in 2006 (European Commission, 2007a). The product designations created by the EU fall into two categories: those linked to a geographical region or territory, and those relating to a particular production method. The designations linked to a territory are: Protected Designation of Origin (PDO). PDO means the name of a region, a specific place or, in exceptional cases, a country, used to describe an agricultural product or foodstuff. Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) means the name of a region, a specific place or, in exceptional cases, a country, used to describe an agricultural product or a foodstuff. Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG) – the specific features required by the TSG system include : use of traditional raw materials in production of a foodstuff, or traditional composition, or mode of production and/or processing reflecting traditional methods (European Commission, 2007a; European Commission, 2007b). Food or produce that is certified has a greater attractiveness as a tourism resource.

While the previous question was aimed at identifying the inherent characteristics of traditional food as seen by restaurateurs, the next one seeks to clarify the qualities they strive to achieve (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Main qualities of traditional food

What qualities do you think traditional food should have?	N	Mean	Standard error	Standard deviation
With consistently high quality	33	4.758	0.087	0.502
Easy and quick to prepare	31	4.000	0.161	0.894
Safe	31	3.871	0.184	1.024
Tasty and aromatic	32	3.844	0.196	1.110
Healthy	32	3.594	0.205	1.160
Ecologically clean	32	3.281	0.216	1.224
Accessible	32	3.250	0.225	1.270
Low-priced	33	2.970	0.192	1.104
Nutritious	32	2.531	0.246	1.391

Source: author's research.

The most important qualities that restaurateurs strive to provide are persistent high quality, safety, good taste and aroma, and healthiness. These are all qualities that are mandatory for any kind of food, and answer to the basic requirements of customers. Qualities such as cleanliness, accessibility, low prices and nutrition are assessed relatively lower, which again is a warning sign for losing some key characteristics of traditional food (clean raw materials, big nutrition value, widely accessible to the local population). Easily and quickly prepared foods are given high priority, which could greatly limit the variety of offered traditional foods, because traditional Bulgarian dishes are characterized by slow cooking.

## Conclusion

Traditional food is one of the milestones in conveying local culture to tourists. It is therefore very important that Bulgarian traditions in foodstuff production and nutrition should be studied and presented adequately in tourism business.

Despite the small scale of this study on traditional foods and the way they are perceived by managers in tourism, results are informative and relevant to those in many European countries. The characteristics of traditional food that respondents perceive as most important are: popularity within a certain region, authentic way of cooking, relatively long and real history of consumption and production. Persistent high quality, safety, healthiness and good taste are the qualities that restaurateurs are trying to provide. There is also evidence of tourism businesses not been aware of the importance of using ecologically clean local produce. Concentrating only on the cooking method and neglecting the raw materials used may greatly deteriorate both the quality and the authenticity of traditional food.

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