

# Local Perspectives of the Relationships between Food and Tourism in the City of Girona (Catalonia, Spain)

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**Abstract** *Food is playing an increasingly more relevant role in the development of tourism. While the link between local produce and the tourist experience is studied in rural regions, few studies have scrutinized the relevance of local food in urban areas. This research analyses the significance attached to the local product for food tourism in the city of Girona, north-eastern Catalonia. The study is based on a qualitative methodology which is focused on twelve semi-structured interviews conducted with local public and private food-based experts, including professionals from the hospitality, catering and gastronomic culture promotion sectors of Girona. Results show the relevance of identity products and local markets, and the potential of restaurants and events to create awareness and increase the visibility of local food. However, results also show that local products need to be effectively integrated into its food tourism system through collaboration and cooperation among public and private actors, to enhance the role of place as a source of local food and tourism attraction in urban areas. This also contributes to the relationships between the agri-food and the retail sector from the production to the consumption of food.*

**Keywords:** *Culinary Heritage, Cultural Identity, Food Tourism, Gastronomy, Local Produce, Urban Area*

## INTRODUCTION

Food tourism is a growth generator in many regions around the world and it attracts a growing number of tourists. Recent data show that eight out of ten tourists' choice of destination is influenced by gastronomy, and that it accounts for more than one-third of their expenditure on tourism (Europa Press, 2019). Food tourists look for authentic experiences that are typical of the host culture, with food heritage being among the most important attraction factors as an avenue to express a place's identity and promote natural and cultural geographies (Dixit, 2019; Tresserras & Medina, 2008).

Food is one of the most important ways in which tourists engage with a destination's culture and identity (Noguer-Juncà, 2018; Timothy, 2015). At the same time, gastronomy became an important element for brand and image definition and diversification (Hjalager, 2010), and a pathway to boost tourism (Gurbaskan, 2019). While tourism is a competitive

activity, the development of food tourism represents a competitive advantage for destinations (Knollenberg et al., 2020). In order to increase the impact of food tourism, local products need to be protected and promoted by public and private initiatives. This research understands local foods as an avenue to emphasize "locality as a closed or bounded system, where food is produced, processed and retailed within a geographically circumscribed area" (Morris & Buller, 2003, p.559), in this case Girona, north-eastern Catalonia.

Catalonia is an internationally recognised food destination because of an ancient culinary culture (Fusté-Forné and Mundet, 2021), the Mediterranean diet (Medina, 2005), or the concentration of Michelin-starred restaurants (Pujol, 2009). These, together with an increasing interest of visitors on 'food', have progressively led public and private actors to the management and marketing of food as a significant part of the tourism system. Girona is featured with iconic local

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products from the sea (such as Palamós prawns) and the inland (such as local cheeses, oil or wine), both from agriculture practices (such as apples) and the wilderness (such as mushrooms). However, the international gastronomic image of Girona's food culture has often been linked to regional celebrity chefs, specially Ferran Adrià and the Roca brothers (Garcia-Arbós, 2008).

While the role played by local produce in the rural tourist experience is largely studied, it needs further evidence in the case of urban destinations. Food is a significant element in cities as a source of differentiation (Henderson, 2016) and of tourism attraction (Okumus et al., 2007). In recent years, places around the world have witnessed how food has been increasingly used not only as an economic commodity, but "in favour of urban destination marketing that is socially and culturally informed: where food can be utilised in the cultural representation of place and expression of the social landscape" (Stalmirska, 2020, p.4). The utilization of food in destination management and marketing of cities is rapidly growing. In this sense, earlier research has scarcely analysed the development of food tourism in urban destinations (Lai, 2020; Okumus & Cetin, 2018).

Previous studies are mostly focused on the urban food experience as a key aspect to analyse new models of consumption (Soro, 2016), the role of urban food markets (Dimitrovski & Crespí, 2018; Fusté-Forné et al., 2021) and the influence of local food on tourism marketing (Amore & Roy, 2020). Focused on the stimulation of local food production and consumption, the main objective of this article is to understand the relationships between local food and tourism in urban environments and analyse the significance of local produce in the current offer of food tourism in the city of Girona from a local perspective. The potential of local food in urban destination development relies on the protection and promotion of food heritage and identity according to the perspectives of both public and private stakeholders (Carral et al., 2020). Sirše (2014) affirms that food tourism contributes to both cities' overall attraction and visitor experience because gastronomy embraces a variety of actors and sectors. According to Sirše (2014), food experiences in tourism cities do not only impact on destination attractiveness, but also on the sustainability of cultural heritages and local landscapes, and on the reinforcement of regional identities.

The paper begins with a review of the academic literature, analysing the concept of food tourism and the processes by which urban areas valorise gastronomy. The paper analyses Girona's gastronomy from a qualitative point of view and through semi-structured interviews, to understand the importance of its local products and to define strategies to attract tourists looking for authentic food experiences. Also, results are presented and discussed in relation to the research objective and the conceptual framework.

## ANALYSING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN FOOD AND TOURISM IN URBAN ENVIRONMENTS

### The Definition of Food Tourism

Food is an increasingly important part of the tourism experience, an issue that has been widely studied in the academic literature (Ellis et al., 2018). This topic has been developed in parallel with the creation and commercialization of food tourism products by destinations. Therefore, this increased interest in gastronomy among tourists (Su et al., 2020) has led to the consolidation of specific segments of food tourism. In addition to wine tourism (Hall, 2013), new sectors have emerged, such as cheese tourism (Fusté-Forné, 2020) and coffee tourism (Jolliffe, 2010) as specific forms of food tourism where a tourism value is awarded to local food.

Nowadays, there are many ways to discover local and regional cuisine. Authors like Bessière (1998) emphasized the linkages between food and identity, and cultural and natural integrity. Long (2004) adds that food is a gateway to the discovery of other cultures where the local origin of food represents a crucial attraction factor (Hall & Gössling, 2016). While the first author to link local produce to tourism was Belisle (1983), food tourism did not develop until the beginning of the twenty-first century, when gastronomy became an increasingly more important factor of destination attractiveness (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Henderson, 2009) and, as a consequence, destination marketing (Du Rand et al., 2003; Getz & Robinson, 2014).

Hall and Sharples (2003) presented one of the most widely accepted definitions of food tourism, namely "visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of a specialist food production region are the primary motivating factor for travel" (p.10). Millán and Agudo (2010) emphasized that food tourism is a "tourist activity involving the tasting of the local food, being an element to get closer to the culture, history and customs of the host community" (p.95).

### Who is the Food Tourist?

According to Oliveira (2011), "tourists consider gastronomy as an opportunity to get to know the culture of the host community better. It is not only the tasting of food that motivates tourists for cultural reasons, but the possibility of discovering habits associated with local gastronomy, the chance to visit museums on the topic and to learn how to cook local food" (p.743). Likewise, gastronomy is viewed as

a cultural attraction that tells people about a region's identity, and according to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2012), it improves the quality of the tourist experience.

McKercher (2020) describes that a purposeful tourist sees food - as a cultural attribute - as a "primary motive for visiting a destination and the individual has a deep cultural experience" (p.127). Tikkanen (2007) presents a broadly similar description, explaining the motivations for food tourism according to the typology of the experience, and showing the relevance of the planning and development of food experiences that satisfy tourist preferences - from visiting a producer to experiencing an event. Gastronomy can help to transform a region into a food tourism destination. Although it is not often considered the main motivation to visit a destination, it does influence the choice and also improves the tourist experience and encourages repeat visits (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020).

Recent papers have also highlighted that gastronomy can provide added value and make a place stand out from the competition (Knollenberg et al., 2020; Noguer-Juncà et al., 2021; Stone, Migacz & Wolf, 2019), whereby tasting the local food and learning about the host culture can be one of the main reasons to go somewhere (Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020). In relation to the current research, the Catalan Tourist Board (2014) considers food tourism in Catalonia as a type of tourism which allows visitors to "taste the essence of a cuisine that gathers in its dishes the tradition of its history, its geography and its culture, for time immemorial. Visiting local markets; tasting quality products; talking with the chefs; exploring wineries or going to a cooking workshop are the kind of things that every tourist who visits Catalonia can enjoy" (p.6). This paper explores how this is manifested in Girona.

## Food Tourism in Urban Destinations

Food tourism is increasingly being studied in both rural (Fusté-Forné & Mundet, 2021) and urban areas (Amore & Roy, 2020), although further research is required on this topic in cities. According to Stalmirka (2020), there is a growing number of urban destinations that place food at the center of their tourism management and marketing strategies. Previous literature showcases the food tourism's importance in cities and reveals that food and gastronomy have a crucial role in urban tourism (Sirše, 2014). In particular, the development of food tourism in cities addresses different topics, according to Sirše (2014), such as the promotion of hospitality and tourism entrepreneurship, the creation of visitor experiences, the contribution to employment and competitiveness, and the support of a local based agriculture and a sustainable food industry. In this sense, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2012) highlights gastronomy experiences with local food as a principle to

support cities and regions from an economic, social and environmental perspective.

The relationship between food and tourism also informs the creation and development of tourism products relevant for place branding and marketing (Carral, Del Río & López, 2020). In a similar vein than the current paper, Stalmirka (2020) develops a qualitative study focused on interviews with food tourism stakeholders from public and private sectors to analyse how food is communicated to visitors in the British city of York: "knowledge of these specific characteristics and peculiarities of food allows tourism professionals to develop urban destination marketing that is socially and culturally informed which may help to reinforce the destination's uniqueness and difference" (p.1). Recent research has explored the relationship between local food and tourism in cities of North America (Nelson, 2020), Latin America (Pérez-Gálvez et al., 2017), Europe (Dimitrovski & Crespi Vallbona, 2018), or Asia (Henderson, 2016).

Specifically, this paper identifies a research gap in the literature that explores local food in Catalan urban environments, where only few studies have analysed the local-global food experiences in urban areas (Soro, 2016) and the role of food in urban markets (Dimitrovski & Crespi, 2018), focused on the case of Barcelona. As a consequence, this paper aims to analyse the relevance of local food as part of a city food tourism system beyond the Catalan capital city. While over the last two decades Girona has become a first-class gastronomic destination, mainly thanks to the international reputation of chefs Ferran Adrià and Roca brothers, and their restaurant (De Albuquerque et al., 2019), this research adds a specific approach to this understanding by focusing on how the binomial of "food" and "Girona" is negotiated through the perceptions of local experts about local food.

## METHODOLOGY

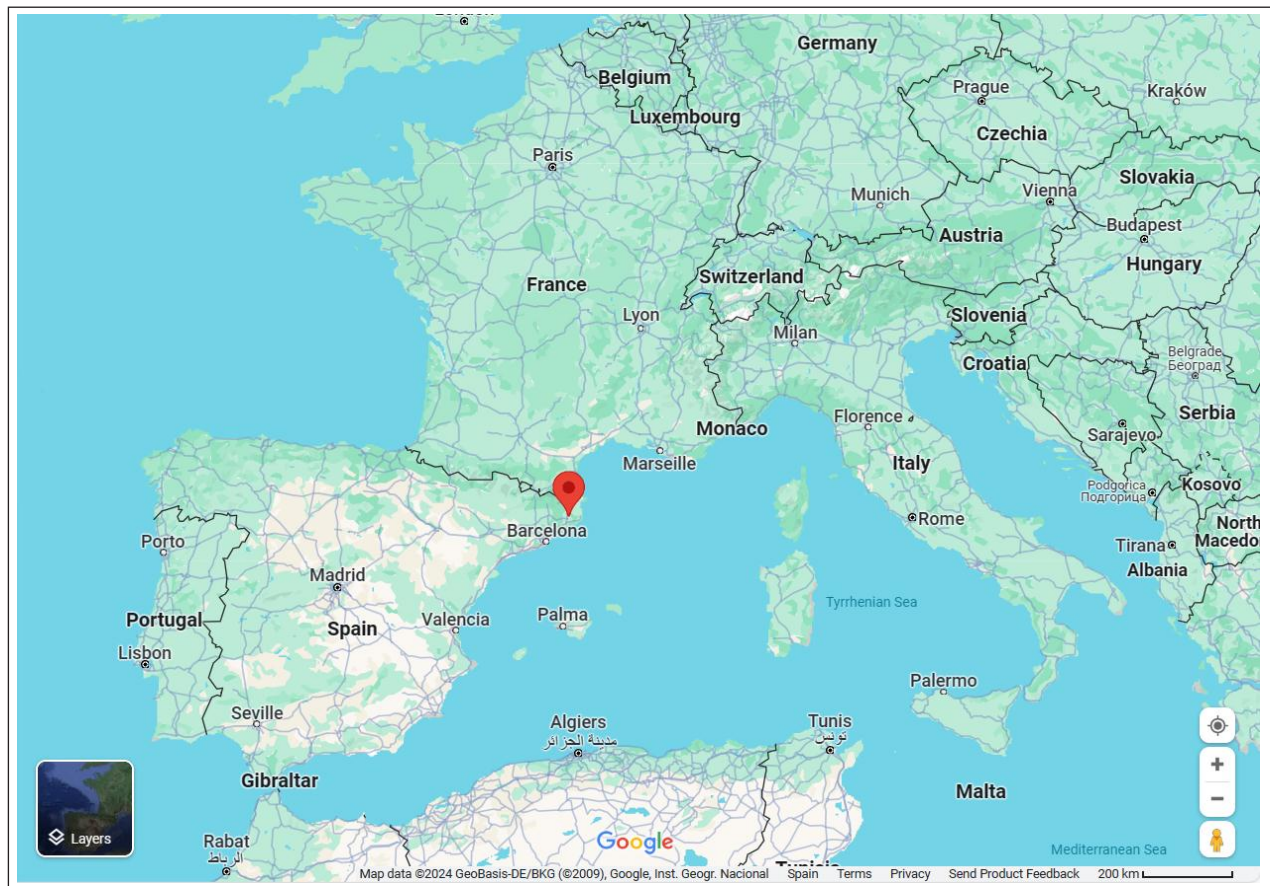
This paper is based on the local perspectives on how local food products are embedded in the offer of food tourism in Girona. The need to adopt an exploratory approach led the researchers to use a qualitative design to evaluate public and private actors' perspectives. The qualitative analysis, which is based on semi-structured interviews, was chosen due to its appropriateness to capture in-depth details about phenomena that cannot be conveyed in quantitative data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Qualitative research is also crucial for studying things in their natural settings, and for understanding how and why people view a particular issue (Walsh, 2003), and to analyse the situation from a local perspective (Bartunek & Seo, 2002).

Girona is a city of approximately 100,000 inhabitants, based on data of the Statistical Institute of Catalonia (IDESCAT,

2020), located 90 kilometres north of Barcelona and 60 kilometres south of France (Fig. 1). The city has consolidated an urban tourism strategy and the number of tourists in the city has increased from 234.100 in 2010 to 418.300 in 2022 (Ajuntament de Girona, 2021). However, few previous studies have analysed the situation of a local-based food tourism in the city and those who did studied it from the perspective of El Cellar de Can Roca (Aulet et al., 2016; De Albuquerque et al., 2019).

Using purposive sampling, twelve interviews were conducted with people who are experts, and directly linked to the city's offer of food tourism, from both the public and private sectors (gastronomic tourist services providers, and communication and marketing professionals), as it is observed in Table 1. Participants ranged from 30 and 50 years old and they have been working in the gastronomic sector for more than five years. The semi-structured

interviews were conducted by the first researcher between November 2019 and April 2020 until theoretical saturation was reached and no further information was obtained (Matteucci & Gnoth, 2017). The interview questions emerged from the existing academic literature about the tourism value of local food and the relevance of food tourism in destinations. While interviews were mostly carried out at the interviewee's offices, a few of them were conducted using video conference online platforms due to the impact of COVID-19 in Spain since March 2020. Interviews lasted between twenty-five and ninety minutes (the average duration was forty-five minutes) and they were audio recorded with the previous consent of the participants. All the interviews and the analysis were carried out in Catalan, and the quotations presented in this paper have been translated from the original language into English.



Source: Google Maps, 2024.

**Fig. 1: Location of Girona, Catalonia**

After data collection, all the interviews were transcribed. As part of the analysis of the responses of the interviewees, a process of thematic codification was conducted by the first

author using a qualitative data analysis software, and later discussed and agreed with the other authors. As a result of data analysis, four themes were identified. In consequence,

results presented in the next section are divided into four subsections with the main topics identified: (a) evolution and present situation of food tourism in Girona; (b) the most representative local food products of the city; and their role

in the current gastronomic offer focused on the tourist value provided by c) restaurants and d) events. These dimensions are further described below:

**Table 1: Interviewees' Professional Sectors**

Interviewee	Sector	Years of Experience
Interviewee 1	Public administration	+ 10 years
Interviewee 2	Non-profit private association	+ 10 years
Interviewee 3	Private sector	+ 20 years
Interviewee 4	Private sector	+ 7 years
Interviewee 5	Private sector	+ 20 years
Interviewee 6	Private sector	+ 4 years
Interviewee 7	Private sector	+ 5 years
Interviewee 8	Public administration	+ 10 years
Interviewee 9	Private sector	+ 5 years
Interviewee 10	Journalist and culinary critic	+ 20 years
Interviewee 11	Gastronome and culinary school director	+ 20 years
Interviewee 12	Journalist and culinary critic	+ 5 years

Source: Own Source.

## RESULTS

### Origins of Food Tourism in the City of Girona

While the interviewees agreed that it is difficult to define the origin of food tourism in Girona because eating and drinking represent a 'compulsory' ingredient of any trip, the beginning of food tourism in Girona could date back to the last decades of the twentieth century, when tourism started flowing to destinations such as the city of Girona. However, according to interviewee 8, the promotion of food tourism in Girona began early in the twenty-first century with the founding of the Gastronomic Tourism Club by the Catalan Tourist Board which resulted in the development of strategies for the management and marketing of food as an important aspect of tourism attraction.

Girona has some of the world's best restaurants, and this has raised international awareness of the region's cuisine. Interviewee 1 states that the golden age of El Bulli, acknowledged the best restaurant in the world by The San Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants of the Restaurant magazine in 2002, 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009, was a turning point for Girona's cuisine, and consequently for the region. Later, El Celler de Can Roca also contributes to build on that reputation. Specifically, interviewee 10 explained the

factors that have influenced the gastronomy of Girona and reflect its culinary potential:

"A long time before El Celler de Can Roca there were some very famous establishments in the city frequented by important people. In Girona it was already possible to eat well but there was nothing like El Celler de Can Roca. For decades, until the 1990s, the benchmark was the Alt Empordà region, especially Figueres, and then the Baix Empordà region, and the area around Sant Feliu de Guíxols, Palamós, Palafrugell, the microcosm known as "the Empordanet". The Motel Empordà was the leading exponent, a culinary temple in the Girona region. The mayor of Girona frequently expressed his desire for a similar establishment to the Motel in Girona. Empordà's leading position was boosted when Juli Soler and Ferran Adrià arrived in Cala Montjoi, in Roses, to run El Bulli. At the same time, the Celler de Can Roca was in Girona, and replaced El Bulli as the number one in the world".

The interviewees from the private sector also highlighted the positive effect of being among one of the world's best restaurants, and how such visibility has supported the development of the region's tourism and the catering and hospitality sector, as interviewee 6 explains: "for our hotel, the gastronomic offer is an added value that enhances the stay of our hosts". In conclusion, the beginning of food tourism in Girona is based on the international recognition of celebrity

chefs and their restaurants, which have put Girona on the gastronomic map and, consequently, promoted food tourism in the city. In this sense, the interviewees manifested, as it is shown in Fig. 2, that local food is a source of tourism attraction and it is predominantly distributed and promoted via restaurants (both internationally famous restaurants and regular restaurants), markets and events.

While local food is promoted in the big-name restaurants marketing strategies, it is still underpromoted in other restaurants, markets and gastronomic events. Hence, it is necessary that public administrations and private organizations of the city of Girona work on the strengthening of use and marketing of local food to develop a gastronomic tourist culture in the city, as interviewee 3 pointed out: “gastronomy is tourism, economic transformation and growth, culture, health... and for this reason it is necessary to have a collaboration and cooperation network of public administrations, suppliers and restaurants”. Also, interviewee 9 stated that “the food tourist experience is rewarding and they [tourists] know the local culture when they eat in local restaurants rather than franchises... a food tourist experience cannot be considered complete without learning about the traditions and eating habits of the residents”.

## Products and Local Markets

In order to analyze the connections between the development of food tourism and its link with the gastronomic culture of Girona, the most representative products of the city were identified. As an urban center, the city of Girona has not an own agri-food industry which is found in the Girona region. According to the city’s public promotion bodies, the most renowned products are “xuxos” (a traditional fried sweet filled with cream), apples with a Protected Geographical Indication, sweet sausage, chocolates inspired by the city’s legends, wines and cavas from the Empordà region, ratafia, “salsafins” (a local tuber), mushrooms, cold meats, olive oils and typical Catalan sauces. This diversity illustrates the combination of agricultural and livestock, sweet and savoury, and beverage products that represent the landscapes of Girona and the Costa Brava.

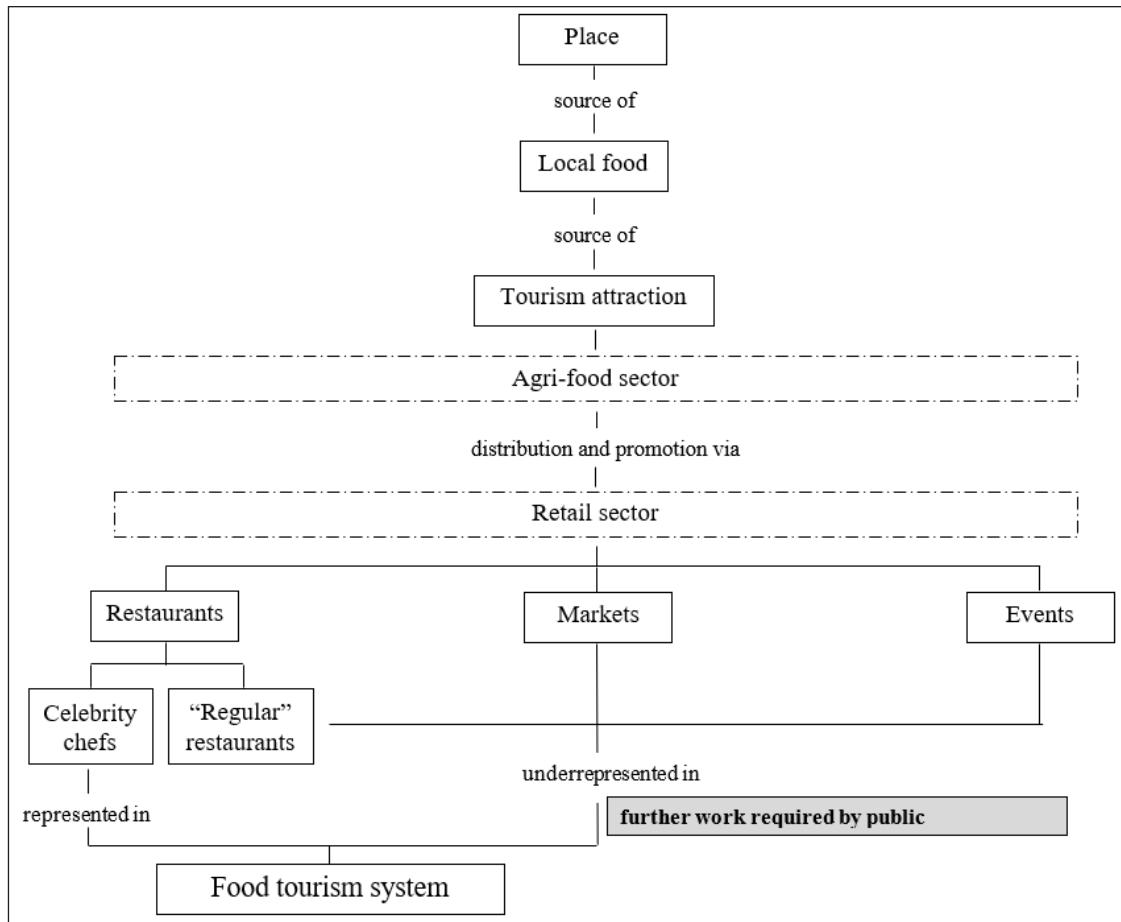
Most of the interviewees consider “xuxo” to be the best-known product, despite it being representative of the whole province of Girona. Interviewee 11 added that Girona’s

cuisine has lost several traditional recipes, such as the recipes involving peas. Some interviewees feel that there are no authentic dishes that showcase the city’s identity. However, interviewee 1 highlighted how Girona’s location benefits its gastronomy, as it lies in an area between the Catalan Pyrenees and the Mediterranean Sea. Interviewee 2 illustrated this combination by saying: “Girona’s cuisine is a mix of contributions from the mountains, the sea and the countryside that give colour to the region”. This strategic location is also acknowledged by local writers such as Josep Pla (Catalan writer and journalist), who largely contributed to the recognition and promotion of Girona culinary heritage and landscapes with his work.

Some of the interviewees also highlighted the importance of markets (see, also, Fig. 2) as another type of much more traditional aspect of the region’s gastronomy, citing Mercat del Lleó and the Mercat de la Devesa as examples. They offer a wide range of both local products and others from elsewhere in Catalonia and Spain. However, the possibilities of markets to promote local produce are scarcely considered, and hence they offer an opportunity for the development of local food tourism. These local products strengthen the link between the gastronomic offer and the regional identity, providing added value to the supply chain, because many of the region’s traditional recipes depend on the availability and seasonality of products which arrive daily to the markets.

## The Role of Restaurants

Most of the interviewees consider that the city of Girona has a great offer of restaurants but some of them are rather impersonal with a limited representation of a local culinary tradition, as in other ‘global’ cities. Specifically, interviewees 10 and 11 argued that the city has to define a local cuisine strategy to promote the region’s products. They also highlight that there are catering companies that have been operating for many years, but they are not focused enough on local and regional products. Both experts consider the Basque Country to be an example of a gastronomic destination that has an authentic offer based on its traditional cuisine. In this sense, previous research argued that “a whole generation of Basque chefs has accomplished the impressive feat of bringing together identity and food” (Leizaola, 2006, p.82). From the perspective of the interviewees, the city of Girona needs a greater representation of the local product on its food tourism system, as displayed in Fig. 2.



Source: Own Source.

**Fig. 2: Local Food in the Food Tourism System of the City of Girona**

Although the city has traditional restaurants such as Casa Marieta, opened since 1892, it also has Asian, Italian and Mexican restaurants that are a part of its gastronomic landscape. In order to complement the information obtained from the interviews, the authors analysed the official website of the Girona Tourist Office (2020), which includes a section called “Where to eat”. Based on these data, it is evident that there are different styles of cuisine in Girona and that traditional Catalan cuisine is one of those, but it is not the most significant. Girona, like many cities, may have many different styles of cuisine because of its multicultural character and the fact that there are tourists who prefer to stay in their comfort zone and eat at internationally renowned restaurant chains, as previous research also stated (Quan & Wang, 2004). That is, the current food tourism offer of Girona seems to satisfy tourists but does not attract them, as interviewee 4 pointed out: “in Girona cycling and culture is more important than food, and they [tourists] discover the food when they taste the products... local food is not a reason to choose Girona as a tourist destination”. Nevertheless, achieving a gastronomic tourism identity requires a strong traditional food offer. This would improve the collaboration among the different actors, and hence, lead

to the development of gastronomy as a growing attraction factor for visitors. The interviewees agree that a lot of work is required to place the local cuisine in this globalised scene.

### Gastronomic Events and Campaigns in the City of Girona

Participants also acknowledged the role of events in the protection and promotion of local food. As for gastronomic events in Girona and their impact on the city’s tourism, interviewee 2 highlighted two: *Girona 10* and *GastroFlors*, both held in association with Girona City Council. *Girona 10*, according to interviewee 2, began when *National Geographic* included Girona among its Top 10 destinations and involved restaurants and hotels in the city offering set menus and rooms for 10 euros. It is now considered a winter festival with a variety of activities like concerts, workshops and courses, among others. *Gastroflors*, a gastronomic show featuring seasonal cuisine with floral elements, is another major promotional activity, according to interviewee 2, and is held at the same time as *Girona Temps de Flors*, the most important annual festival that takes place in the city.

Interviewee 2 also highlighted the Girona Gastronomic Week as one of the oldest activities, which includes different tasting menus at the associated restaurants for two weekends. While there are several examples of events that show the potential of local products and the high culinary level of Girona's restaurants, interviewee 1 feels the city of Girona needs a local event that celebrates local food.

With regards to the use of gastronomic experiences to improve the awareness of Girona products, interviewee 5 mentioned the work to develop tastings for tourists, and especially international tourists, and also to promote the PDO Empordà Wine in collaboration with the Catalan Tourist Board and the Girona Tourist Board, adding that more than half of the wines of the restaurants are Catalan wines. In this sense, interviewee 7 highlights that "the current networks are very important to know other companies and create synergies among actors to develop food tourist products". It is also worth mentioning that almost all respondents stressed the importance of generating online content and being positioned on social media. From a journalistic perspective, interviewees 10 and 12 highlighted the relevance of food and travel guides to promote local gastronomy and the use of reliable communication channels. Most of the interviewees, especially those belonging to the private sector, also value positively the role of the public administration in the promotion of gastronomy and the development of networks. However, some interviewees pointed out that the public administration should encourage and promote Catalan recipes, as well as the agri-food sector, the local product and the retail sector to provide a more robust protection and promotion of 'local food' (refer to Fig. 2).

## DISCUSSION

Previous research shows that food tourism is a recent global trend (Ellis et al., 2018; Everett, 2019), and it has an increasingly role in the culture and economy of destinations like Catalonia (Johannes, 2019). Food tourism helps to reduce the seasonality of tourism, which heavily contributes to regional development (Fusté-Forné, 2020). The gastronomic identity of different regions is becoming more and more important (Everett and Aitchison, 2008; Kim and Iwashita, 2016; Lin et al., 2011) for developing a slow and sustainable tourism (Fusté-Forné, 2023; Star et al., 2020). This research shows that in Girona, both public and private entities are striving to preserve, promote and support the different culinary traditions and quality products.

While food tourism is originally focused on the restaurant sector, it has evolved rapidly to include a wider range of attractions, and new ways of understanding gastronomy as a leisure form, both for locals and tourists, such as events and markets. The link between gastronomy and tourism is booming, and food tourism is now a major tool for the

promotion of destinations (Du Rand & Heath, 2006; Noguer-Juncà et al., 2021; Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020). But there is also a need to take into account the different elements that make up the gastronomic value chain, i.e. producers, the agricultural sector, livestock and fishing activities, the services and trade sector, among others, which also have an identifiable role in a region's culinary landscape and food quality.

In this sense, it is also important to highlight the relevance of food as an example of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), which is not only a vital aspect of a community's identity (Lee, 2023), but also of the practices that influence on production and consumption (Lee, 2018). Food, as a component of ICH, has a special place in the preservation of the cultural identity where the recognition of iconic foods (Timothy & Ron, 2013), such as the French baguette included in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, 2022), not only celebrates the food and culinary heritage but also has the potential to impact tourism (Qiu et al., 2022).

The recognition of foods as ICH represents a tourism attraction factor, where tourists, engaging with local traditions, also contribute to the preservation of local places and practices. Tourists, as we discussed in the theoretical framework, seek these unique culinary experiences, where they immerse themselves in the cultural narratives embedded in traditional products and dishes (see Bardolet-Puigdollers & Fusté-Forné, 2023). For example, the French baguette is not only a bread type, and it represents historical dynamics of production and consumption, and a way of life which is protected and promoted through food tourism.

The aim of the research was to analyse the relevance of local food in the context of the food tourism on offer in the city of Girona from a local perspective. The results show that the city's use of gastronomy as a tourist attraction is a recent phenomenon, as it has also happened with other gastronomic destinations (Gálvez et al., 2017; Hillel et al., 2013; Kumar, 2019; Ren & Fusté-Forné, 2023). It is clear that local products are well integrated into the mind-set of the interviewees, but they do not feel that Girona's food identity is being sufficiently communicated to visitors. Although the city of Girona is located in a very rich environment, meaning its gastronomy is influenced by a contrast between sea, mountains and countryside, and local produce does appear at events and markets, this is still limited (Fusté-Forné et al., 2021).

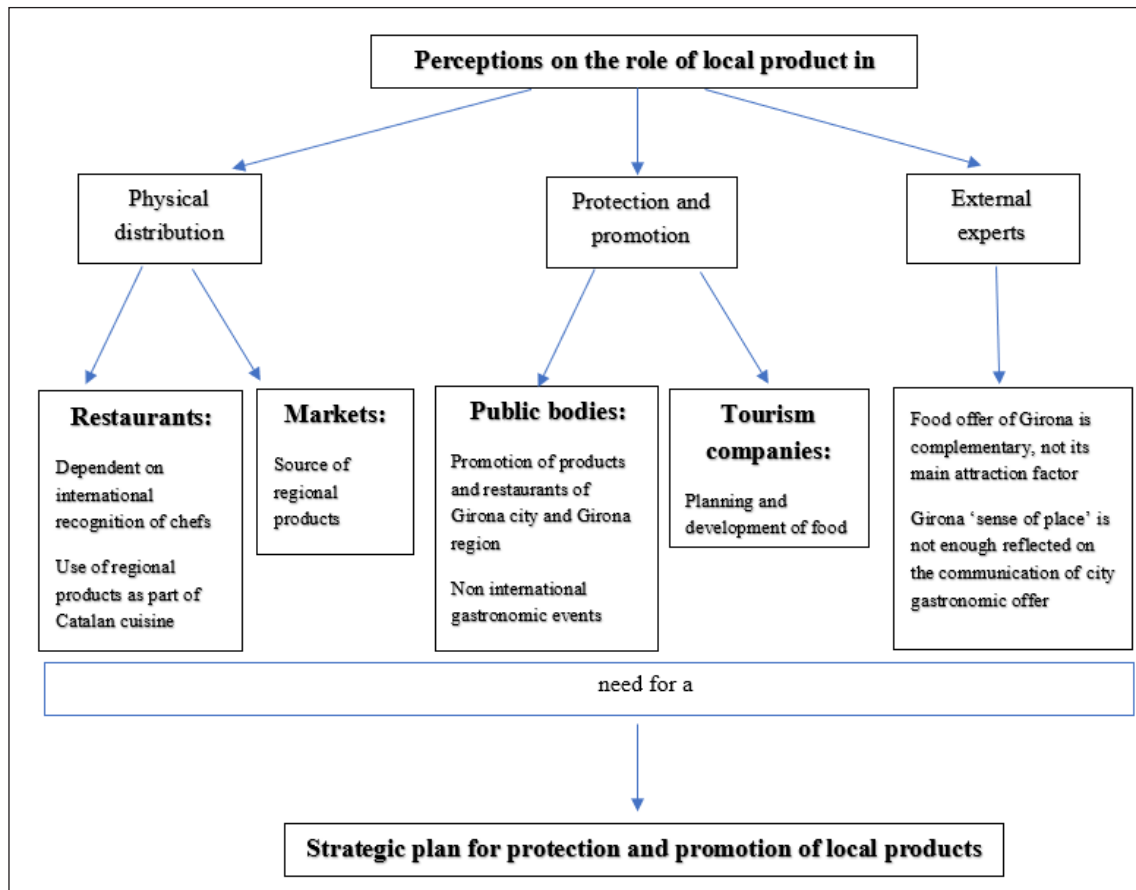
Although there are opportunities to foster locally-based food tourism in the city (for example, using the 'xuixo'), food based actors in Girona region are urged to stimulate tourism products reflective of local identity that showcase the many different aspects of the local food culture. That is, to use the gastronomy to add value to the destination

(Stone et al., 2019). Cities must highlight food resources and food-based experiences, and restaurants primarily serve to convey the relation between sustainable food production and consumption (Higgins-Desbiolles & Wijesinghe, 2019) where the promotion of local food is in turn crucial for urban sustainable development (Pérez Gálvez et al., 2017).

## CONCLUSION

This paper shows that it is not sufficient to have celebrity chefs and traditional products, and there is also a need to

incorporate ‘local food’ as a significant part of the food tourism planning and development to protect and promote a food tourism identity and a competitive advantage. Also, a local-based food tourism system will provide an added value to local food and, hence, ensure the continuity of local producers. To do this, it is necessary to develop a strategic plan that aims for the collaboration and cooperation between private and public organizations involved in the creation of a local food identity (Fig. 3) based on the actors who participate in the food value chain from production to consumption.



Source: Own Source.

**Fig. 3: Stakeholders' Perspective of the Significance of Local Products in the City of Girona**

## Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the study of the relationships between food and tourism in cities and results show that the promotion of local products in the city of Girona is not fully developed. The city has not created its own narrative of local products beyond celebrity restaurants. Unless this potential is fully realised, tourists seeking food authenticity may feel that Girona has

a limited offer as an urban food destination. Indeed, one of the interviewees felt visitors will be dissuaded if the city is not offering anything different to what they can find at home. Food is a crucial factor to improve the tourist experience and, hence, it encourages repeat visits (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020) which is accentuated when the gastronomic offer is focused on local food (Alderighi et al., 2016). This paper adds texture to recent literature about the relationships between food and tourism in urban destinations from the

case of Girona and the perspectives of local actors from the private and public sectors.

From a practical perspective, results also show the heterogeneity of roles played by 'local food' in Girona. This is a challenge when food is part of urban destination management and marketing, where strategies are expected to combine agendas of multiple stakeholders (Okumus et al., 2007; Stalmirska, 2020), and collaboration and cooperation between actors is required for the success of the food tourism value chain (UNWTO, 2012). Thus, both public administrators and tourism companies as well as physical distributors of local products, like restaurants and markets, promote the products and dishes of the Girona region, but there is still room to emphasise specific identity products and dishes directly tied to the city. This means that, despite the international recognition of chefs and restaurants in the city, local food is not yet a key tourist attraction. Hence, results of this research call for a development of a strategic plan to protect and to promote local food products, which will contribute to a more robust narrative of 'local food' in Girona.

## Limitations and Future Research

The main limitation of this research is that the study is focused solely on the opinion of local food-based experts. Future research may also help to expand the contributions of this article based on the opinion of visitors and tourists where a comparative study may emerge from the perspectives of domestic and international tourists. The voices from the people enjoying the foods in Girona would also contribute to the understanding of their motivations and experiences about the relationships between 'food' and 'tourism' and would be critical to improve the food experiences. While this is a qualitative analysis, a quantitative analysis of the economic impact of the consumption of local products in the city of Girona would enable further generalization of the results and shed some light on the knowledge and appreciation of Girona's culinary identity among tourists. Also, food tourism in urban environments needs rapid digitalization, adaptation to new and increasingly changing market trends and, of course, to manage the crisis situation arising from the spread of COVID-19. These are some of the future research opportunities that will help us to understand both present and future development of the sustainable connection between food and tourism, focused on a locally based offer that reflects the identity of the city and its people.

It is also important to improve the linkage between tourism stakeholders and the primary sector, which will benefit both agents and the image of the city. In this sense, the creation of local food networks would lead to the development of a growing local-based food tourism (Boesen et al., 2017).

While the city does a lot of work to promote the local (Girona) and regional (Catalonia) product that bring both locals and tourists into close contact with the region's food culture, some of the interviewees stated that Girona needs to devise a strong narrative that links the city to its local products. Results of this research show that the food tourism system of the city still excessively relies on its celebrity restaurants. In this sense, there is also a need to strengthen the online promotional channels of the public administration, i.e. to design a more visual webpage or to promote regional products of Girona in social networks as an avenue towards a growing visibility of local food in digital environments (Sigala et al., 2012).

All cities are expected to offer a local cuisine based on their regional landscapes (Mak et al., 2012; Mohamed et al., 2020), and the city of Girona is no exception, especially as it can draw on the international reputation of restaurants such as El Bulli and El Cellar de Can Roca. Both Ferran Adrià and the Roca brothers have put Girona on the world map of gastronomy, as explained above. Given the limited presence of food experiences in the city of Girona, it is suggested that local restaurants, as physical distributors of local products, also organize gastronomic events and thematic menus with local products which are vital to promote a food destination. The city needs to use this as a springboard to boost the impact of its traditional products and dishes, and thereby attract visitors who like to discover a culture through its culinary and food heritage.

## Declaration of Interest

No potential competing interest was reported by the authors.

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