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Dubrovnik as a Culinary Destination for Italian Tourists

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Abstract

Culinary tourism has become an essential part of the overall tourist experience. It is becoming a new trend, and for travelers, it is not anymore important to travel to historically and culturally rich destinations, but also to destinations rich in gastronomy and culinary experiences. Dubrovnik, a charming tourist destination, has become one of the most sought-after destinations in Europe, particularly attractive to Italian travelers. Dubrovnik is known worldwide for its long and rich history, culture, and nature. This study offers useful recommendations on how to further market Dubrovnik as a culinary destination for Italian tourists to tourism stakeholders like local government, hospitality companies, and tour operators. Additionally, due to its distinctive gastronomic offer and abundance of traditional foods, Dubrovnik has a significant potential to grow these experiences. This study reveals what Italian tourists believe about Dubrovnik as a culinary destination and offers recommendations about what Dubrovnik can do to improve in its offer to attract more Italian tourists and tourists from other countries seeking culinary experiences.

Keywords: Dubrovnik, culinary tourism, Italian travelers, gastronomy, culinary experiences, culinary destination, culinary tourists, Italian culinary destinations, local food development

Culinary tourism

A growing sector of the tourism business, culinary tourism embraces all the traditional ideals connected to the newest travel trends, including respect for culture and tradition, authenticity, and sustainability (Ricardo, 2019, p. 1). The exploration of food for touristic purposes is known as culinary tourism and this model of tourism has nowadays become an essential part of any vacation experience. Tourists frequently eat out, and “food is believed to rank alongside climate, lodging, and scenery” in terms of relevance to travelers (Culinary Tourism, 2023). The further you travel, the wider the range of culinary experiences enjoyed. It is not about the food you eat; culinary tourism is not necessarily about dining luxuriously, but more about eating adventurously to seek out new culinary experiences (Denise, 2023). After Erik Wolf, president of the World Food Travel Association, published a white paper on the topic in 2001, culinary tourism gained popularity (“Culinary tourism,”2023).

According to Ricardo (2019), Italy is known worldwide for the richness and variety of its gastronomy, and agri-tourism represents one of the most important places where culinary tourists can experience local food and beverages. Italian visitors view culinary tourism as a departure from their normal routines and eating habits that allows them to sample new foods and gain some notoriety among their family and friends (Riccardo, 2019, p. 1-3).

The local food movement

The local food movement is one of the social food movements that aims to transform the food system by transforming how we see and engage with it (Riccardo, 2019, p. 1). According to another source, Feenstra (2002), the production, processing, distribution, and consumption of local foods are the cornerstones of the local food movement, which also supports local economies, producers, and the environment.

In scientific literature, culinary tourists are often considered as *foodies* and the reason for that lies in the fact that these tourists apart from their desire to enjoy food, also want and seek memorable experiences related to eating and dining (Riccardo, 2019, p. 3). This particular characteristic is what makes them specific as tourists and is the reason behind the fact why more and more tourist destinations attempt to satisfy the needs of this growing tourist population.

Motivations of culinary tourists

There are many tourists who do not show interest in culinary tourism. However, according to Nicoletti (2019), there is an even greater number of tourists who choose to travel specifically because of the culinary tourism, or because they want to satisfy specific needs related to that type of tourism. The same author thus claims in the research that the main reason those tourists travel is to experience various gastronomic customs and cultures and learn about them through eating regional food and expanding their expertise of cooking by learning about different culinary traditions. The research also shows that those travelers who are willing to experience destination gastronomy are also willing to pay extra for their meals and seek higher standards of quality and authenticity from the local cuisine. Based on the findings of this research, tourists can be classified in three groups: (1) “experiencers” – visitors who prioritize gastronomy while traveling, (2) “enjoyers” – visitors who just have some curiosity in the culinary and gastronomic aspects, (3) “survivors” – those for whom eating is not an essential component of travel (Nicoletti, 2019, p. 3). Interestingly, Nicoletti in this paper also claims that senior travelers, or people who are older, are more likely to favor the local cuisine, and indulge in traditional food experiences. The explanation for this is obvious: elder travelers have more time to sample local cuisine and learn about certain culinary destinations. Moreover, the research also claims that tourists with a greater motivation for culinary experience are more

educated and, thus, more eager to learn everything they can about the culinary destination, including its culture, local traditions, local cuisine, and history of local people. Lastly, visitors who are more interested in local cuisine have also been identified to have a stronger economic impact. As a result, those travelers spend more on culinary experiences, benefiting not only the economic development of the destination, but also the local economy. All of the above proves the importance not only of culinary tourism, but it also highlights the need of any tourist destination to invest in this specific sector and learn how to attract these tourists, since the benefits are not only for restaurant owners but for the overall tourist destination.

Travel history of Italian tourists

It is safe to state that Italian tourists have always been considered as true lovers of travel. Travel has become an integral part of their lives and has always helped them escape from their business lives and find inner peace and rest them to escape the daily challenges of the business world. According to the research, Italian people mostly travel for pleasure or for leisure. The beginning of *Ferragosto*, which is a public holiday in Italy, also marks the beginning of an annual state holiday and of the time when most Italian tourists travel in order to rest and recover from hard work. While the country itself has long been one of the top tourist destinations in the world, with millions of visitors each year ready to experience its famous history, art and cuisine, or enjoy its fashion and design, it is another aspect of this country that also needs to be taken into serious consideration.

Another aspect of Italian travel that needs further exploration is whether Italian tourists prefer to travel in their own country or abroad. In recent years, the number of Italian tourists traveling outside of Italy's borders has increased in numbers and although there was a slight decline during the Covid-19 pandemic, Italians have not stop traveling, because it has already become an important part of their tradition and of their culture.

Impact of Covid-19 on Italians' travel behavior

From the beginning of Covid-19, the travel and tourist sectors have faced a huge challenge. Tourism was the most affected sector industry sector, and this was a clear sign that businesses which depend on tourism have to take this situation seriously and have to understand the “new normal” and new preferences of future travelers. As Italian tourists are a huge market segment and since they really enjoy traveling and interacting with other people, this situation has been a huge challenge for all the markets because they had to create something which will be suitable and at the same time attractive for the new situation. Furthermore, many things have changed during Covid-19 and travelers have started to behave and think differently about travel. According to Corbisiero (2020), Italian travelers in the future will continue to travel in different destinations, but they will do it in a different way than before. Even though Italian tourists find technology to be a very useful thing when they travel and when they need to make a choice about the destination they want to travel to, they are not satisfied with the virtual travel, and they do not see virtual reality and augmented reality as the alternatives to travel in the future (Corbisiero, 2020). Interaction with other people when travelling, either with locals or their travel companions, therefore, still seems to be very important for Italian tourists, and their primary reason to go to a certain destination is to rest from a busy life, and, above everything else, to have fun and enjoy their holiday. The same author in the research, distinguishes two different concepts: “tourism of the mind” from “tourism of the body”. Tourism of the mind is related to the virtual and imaginative travel while tourism of the body has a completely different meaning, and a completely different set of behavior while traveling. Italian tourists are only interested in the experiences in which they can establish a direct and meaningful relationship with a specific place and/or object. Even though, the pandemic has influenced tourism, Italian tourists still have the will to travel and still want to have a direct relationship with the people and the place itself (Corbisiero, 2020).

Even though Covid-19 has had a certain impact on their willingness to travel, the research has shown that they mostly have changed the way they travel and the way they behave during the trip, and not so much the willingness to travel. There is a trend happening today regarding the Italian tourists. The most recent trends show that there is an increase in the number of outbound holiday trips taken by Italian tourists from 2019 till 2022, despite the pandemics (Global Data, n.d.).

Motivations, preferences, and behaviors of outbound Italian tourists

Italian tourists are a special market segment, and they have many things that make them unique. In the article “Why Target the Italian Market” (2019, the author points out that there is a growing market of Italian tourists who are traveling beyond their home country in order to explore destinations which are interesting to them (Garavini, 2019). According to Garavini, Italian tourists are becoming more discerning when looking for their travel choices. They want to find a unique travel experience and they want to explore the culture of the country they are traveling to. This presents new challenges and opportunities for tourism businesses as they must adapt to the current needs, preferences and changes that are happening within this huge market segment. Tourism businesses that do so, and adapt to the current needs, will create an additional value and valuable contribution to the tourism industry.

According to Garavini (2019), Italian tourists like to spend more money on the restaurants, accommodation, clothing, recreation, and culture. These things are of exceptional importance for Italian tourists when choosing their travel destination and they seek enriching experiences and luxury goods. Another thing of importance for this market segment is that the price is in the line with the quality of the service or the product. Moreover, according to the same research, what Italian tourists value the most are local products and the experience they get when interacting with a person who is selling those locally made products.

Communication is a key segment when considering Italian tourists. Therefore, the importance of knowing Italian language is very crucial and Italians will value more those service providers who are able to speak in their language and it will increase their overall satisfaction with the service and with the product itself (Garavini, 2019).

Italian tourists in Croatia

The most preferred travel destinations for Italian tourists are Croatia, Greece, Spain, and France (Croatian National Tourist Board, 2022). Croatia has always been an attractive destination for Italian tourists especially because it is close to Italy, but also because of its nature and history. The Italians are traditionally among the most frequent tourists in Croatia, and are, therefore, of great importance for Croatia, not only because of the large number of arrivals, but also because of the large number of overnight stays they make, especially in August when it is the time of annual vacation for Italian tourists. According to Croatian Tourist Board, Italian partners confirm the high demand for Croatia even in 2023. Also, the first intense demand has been confirmed for this Easter. The reason why so many Italian travelers want to spend their holiday in Croatia is that it is now more accessible to them due to Croatia's entry into Schengen. (Lozančić, 2023).

The purpose of this research is to identify if Dubrovnik as a tourist destination that is already appealing to Italian tourists is also a culinary destination, and what is required to make this town a culinary destination attractive to Italian tourists.

Method

Purpose

The overall purpose of this data collection is to investigate the importance of gastronomy for Italian travelers and determine what the role of gastronomy is in destination selection. The goal is to determine if the gastronomy is a key factor for Italians and whether they prioritize a destination rich in gastronomy over one rich in culture and history. Additionally, the study aims to measure the significance of local food experiences and their ability to convey culture through food. Finally, the study will analyze the willingness of Italians to visit Dubrovnik (and/or other locations in the region) and explore the culture through food and wine routes, as well as the importance of an authentic cultural food experience.

Participants

To achieve this, the study used a quantitative data collection and a survey questionnaire as the primary data collection tool. The survey is distributed to a sample of Italian participants, and I examined 30 respondents of Italian origin. My participants were Italian students and professors from IULM university, RIT Croatia and other Italian universities. The participants were approached by email and asked to complete an online questionnaire. The questionnaire is created in a Google Survey format.

Instrument

A questionnaire used in this research is adapted from another research (Testa, 2021), and it consists of 22 number questions and/or statements, closed-ended questions, multiple choice questions and 5-point Likert scale questions. The questionnaire was in English, since all students and participants are either currently enrolled or work for an international institution of higher education for which the knowledge of English is mandatory.

This survey aims to provide insights into the importance of gastronomy and cultural food experiences for Italian tourists and their destination selection process. The findings could have implications for the promotion and marketing of tourism in Dubrovnik and possibly other similar destinations in Croatia.

Results

The following results were collected in order to investigate the importance of culinary experiences for Italian travelers and their perception of Dubrovnik as a culinary destination. The results were used to measure the importance of culinary experiences for Italian travelers and determine what Dubrovnik can improve in order to attain or attract this important market niche.

Italian travelers

The first important result is that Italian travelers ranked culinary experiences as essential consideration when choosing a destination for traveling. Therefore, 80% of participants stated that culinary experience is of a great importance for their overall satisfaction with a destination. Interestingly, none of my participants disagreed with that culinary experience is important for their satisfaction. Also, 38% of participants choose a destination based on the gastronomic offer of that destination.

Another significant outcome is that the majority of Italian tourists love to talk to everybody about their culinary experiences. Consequently, 91% of participants stated that they enjoy talking to friends or family members about their culinary experiences. Therefore, word-of-mouth advertising from Italian tourists is a possibility.

In terms of how important culinary experiences are, there are differences between the genders as well. Compared to younger generations, older Italian travelers are more prone to travel for gastronomic pleasures.

To a specific question whether they believed that Dubrovnik is already a culinary destination, 70% of participants disagreed. If we examine how Italian travelers felt about whether Dubrovnik promoted culinary experiences to guests or not, 70% of them believed that Dubrovnik has not yet identified itself on the map of culinary destinations and has not been perceived as such by Italian tourists.

Lastly, the fact that 50% of participants who responded to my survey are willing to visit Dubrovnik is one of the most significant pieces of information I have gathered. As a result, Dubrovnik benefits greatly from the fact that Italian people are still eager to visit there even though it is not yet evolved in terms of culinary tourism.

Discussion

Although Italian tourists will most certainly continue to come in Croatia in the future, it is safe to assume that there will be fewer of them in the future if we do not adapt our services and/or products to their desires. I believe that this is a serious problem because Croatia is used to Italian tourists coming in large numbers, but since they are one of the most demanding customers, I believe that it is quite likely, based on the evidence, that in the future they will find other alternatives and other countries also rich in natural beauty, history and culture if we do not start to attract them with a more personalized service and product, and offer more diversity and a more interesting gastronomical offer.

The results indicate that elder Italian travelers are more likely than younger Italian travelers to seek out gastronomic experiences. Since older travelers typically have higher purchasing power and are willing to spend more on those experiences, this could be therefore expected. Additionally, older travelers can have longer vacations and have more free time which immediately increases their spending on dining out. The results also indicate that female travelers are more likely than male travelers to appreciate culinary encounters while traveling. As a result, it may also be argued that female Italian travelers are more inclined than male Italian travelers to enjoy in culinary experiences. Men may choose to spend their money on other activities that they find more engaging, which could be the cause.

Since Italian travelers rank among the top 5 international visitors to the city of Dubrovnik, this can be considered as an issue of importance for the overall growth of Dubrovnik as a tourist destination. Italian travelers do not find Dubrovnik to be at the moment a desirable culinary destination, and, unfortunately, it seems that the local authorities and tourist workers Dubrovnik make little effort in that direction. As a result, it might be very detrimental to Dubrovnik's future tourism growth. Since Italian travelers are a vital market segment for Dubrovnik and its economic development having a significant economic impact,

I fail to see why the city should not take steps to entice them to stay longer than just a single visit and to attract them to come back again.

Additionally, Dubrovnik has a lot of potential to grow as a culinary destination and offers a lot of opportunities in that segment. There are numerous traditional foods and customs associated with Dubrovnik that might be utilized to lure and attract tourists with their cuisine. For instance, we can take advantage of the chance to showcase our traditional customs, which we do every year on Saint Blaise Day, and traditional Lindo dance, and combine them with some traditional dishes like *brudet*, black risotto, mussels, shellfish, and *rožata* as well as good wine from the Dubrovnik region. This is just one illustration of how Dubrovnik may entice more visitors from Italian regions through its gastronomic offerings.

As my research and results have proven to me that Italian travelers think that Dubrovnik does not promote a culinary tourism to its visitors, it is an enormous issue for Dubrovnik as a potential culinary destination. As a local, I can confirm that culinary tourism is not even promoted to local people. Also, the only true event happening in Dubrovnik is an event called Good Food Festival Dubrovnik. The event is usually held in October, and it is 9th year that this event is organized by Dubrovnik Tourist Board. The event's schedule also includes the customary Restaurant Week with festival menus, Dinner with a Michelin Star Chef, wine tastings, delectable festival specials, gastro tours, workshops on traditional dishes, beer evenings with tasty street food at the Dubrovnik Brewery, various themed dinners, and other intriguing events, all of which feature excellent live music and entertainment (Dubrovnik Tourist Board, 2022). Unfortunately, the event itself could be better promoted to this particular market.

Limitations

The small number of participants and the length of time to collect the data are unquestionably the study's limitations. Travelers from Italy make up a distinct market niche, making it challenging to connect with them and elicit a genuine response. Additionally, I received more responses from older travelers, so I can not draw any conclusions about demographics from that.

Another limitation to the study lies in the fact that there were not many people researching specifically Italian travelers and Dubrovnik as a culinary destination, making it challenging to determine what makes this market niche have special and authentic compared to others, as well as what Dubrovnik actually do in terms of culinary tourism.

Recommendations for further research

In order to further investigate this topic, it would be essential to conduct whether the city authorities and the tourist board are interested to make this destination a culinary destination and promote culinary tourism or will instead continue to promote mass tourism without adding any fresh and more intriguing attractions for travelers.

The research has shown that it is advisable to learn more about the strategies used by successful Italian culinary locations to draw these types of tourists and create unique culinary experiences in the Dubrovnik region.

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