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THE POTENTIAL OF GASTRONOMIC TOURISM IN THE PORTUGUESE MUNICIPALITY OF MIRANDELA

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Abstract

Purpose: The gastronomic heritage of a territory can be a valuable differentiator element for its tourist offer. In this context, it was considered important to survey the main gastronomic references of one of Portugal's most gastronomically iconic municipalities: Mirandela, which however has a reduced hotel capacity. The other central objective of this study is related to the evaluation of two large groups (the local inhabitants and other stakeholders with a closer connection to consumer) about the perceptions related to the enhancement of the gastronomic heritage of Mirandela municipality.

Methodology: A qualitative methodology was adopted, which, due to its specificity, can configure a case study. The technique of collecting information relied on semi-structured interviews, to the local inhabitants (9 interviews) and to several stakeholders with knowledge about the needs and interests of the tourist demand related with gastronomy (10 interviews).

Findings: The position of the inhabitants, who argue that the methods and techniques of the old days should be practically unchanged, under penalty of distorting the quality and authenticity, was identified as the main divergence between the 2 groups. Indeed the remaining respondents, namely chefs, argue that it is essential to innovate methods and techniques for the benefit of that same quality, with the potential offered by new concepts (eg. the evolution in the seasoning of the “sufficiently” concept for the accuracy of the measurement) and the use of new support instruments (eg. probes for temperature control) as a product enhancement, but always respecting its authenticity. In terms of convergence, it was consensual to recognize the importance of imparting knowledge to young people, from the outset with inclusion in school curricula, in raising awareness of the importance of products and recipes as integral parts of local history and in the transmission of knowledge through practice at school, in “workshops”, interpretive centres or community spaces.

Originality/value: Although the municipality of Mirandela has important gastronomic references, where alheira (a traditional smoked sausage famous all around Portugal) and olive oil stand out, there were no studies that characterized this heritage. Simultaneously the perception of the residents and other stockholders (more focused on consumption) about the best way to enhance this gastronomic heritage was never studied. This study managed to confront these two perspectives generating important insights for territorial managers.

Practical implications: We recognize that the characteristics of the intangible heritage are inducers of the possibility of developing attractive tourist experiences, in terms of gastronomic and cultural tourism, boosted by the appetite of the tourist markets for this segment, considered as the one with the greatest growth in the tourism industry as a whole. It will be essential that the territorial managers are able to align the visions of the local inhabitants with the needs and expectations of the tourists. In fact, at the same time that the locals are the guardians of the heritage, they should also be able to enhance this heritage, adding value compatible with the demand and tourist expectations.

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ICABM2020 – Template for Submission Structure



Research limitations: The main limitations are related to the exploratory nature of the study and its restriction to a specific municipality, which makes no possible to generalize conclusions to other territorial realities from the same.

Keywords: Tourism; Gastronomic tourism; Mirandela; Experiences; Locals.

1. Introduction

There is currently a demand from tourists for original experiences and products that avoid copies and banality (Yeoman, et al., 2007). Tourists look for connections and experiences that are rooted in the destination (Boyle, 2004). They are increasingly sophisticated making the choice of the destination they visited part of their lifestyle and a way of expressing their identity (Morgan, et al., 2004).

Regional products and gastronomy stand out among the multiple characteristics that provide authenticity to a destination. “It is a destination’s food, people and places which make up its heritage and its character and which thereby provide a destination with its own authenticity” (Yeoman, et al., 2007, p. 1135).

The typical dishes and food products of a certain area are an expression of the region, they are produced with local ingredients, with the knowledge derived from traditions and shaped by historical circumstances that make each dish unique and impossible to make in other regions (Groves, 2001). However consumers do not seek only the finished product but all the social and cultural conditions under which the product was generated (Littrell, et al., 1993).

Gastronomic tourism is under the focus of the regions because its capacity to attract consumers is recognised as an essential part of the territorial experience (European Travel Commission, 2018). Gastronomy is not only important to generate a tourist experience but “has become a significant source of identity formation in postmodern societies” (Richards, 2002, p. 3). Typical and genuine food acts as a powerful tool to avoid the general ‘McDonaldization’ of food (Ritzer, 2018). Local gastronomy is considered “as being a vital part of culture and community and this is the reason for which it must be kept and protected” (Nistoreanu et al 2018, p.711) Nistoreanu et al 2018, have no doubts to consider food as “the new cultural capital of the destination” (p.712).

Portugal is one of the countries with more potential regarding the gastronomic tourism (Richards 2002) with a diversity of IGP products, and a Mediterranean diet, which is part of UNESCO Intangible Heritage. Mirandela is a municipality on the northeast area of Portugal, which has a considerable number of traditional foods (all of them IGP) - the “Alheira de Mirandela”, the olive oil from “Trás-os-Montes”, the honey from “Terra Quente”, the “Terrincho” cheese, the goats and goat cheese from “Trás-os-Montes”, the “Transmontano” lamb and the “Negrinha de Freixo” olives.

The Mirandela gastronomy was already referenced by Jonh Latouche (1875) in his book *Travels in Portugal* when the author mentions a roasted lamb that he ate while in Mirandela.

This entire heritage constitutes a potential touristic product of high economic interest. However it’s stage of development and structuring of the offer, as well as the respective placement in the markets, still requires a considerable additional effort. It is also necessary reinforce the collective awareness about the value and advantages of all of this heritages in the local community (Rosa, 2009).

In this context, this paper has 2 main goals: to survey the main gastronomic references of one of Portugal's most gastronomically iconic municipalities and having in mind that the gastronomic tourism is rooted in the locals and should be aligned with their culture and perceptions, we pretend to evaluate the perception of two large groups (the local inhabitants and other stakeholders with a closer connection to touristic market) about the enhancement of the gastronomic heritage of Mirandela municipality generating important insights for territorial managers.

This paper is divided in five sections. After this introduction, the research starts with the literature review and an overview of the main definitions. Secondly, we describe and justify the methodology used in this research. Then we present the main results of the qualitative empirical research. The paper ends with the conclusions and recommendations for regional managers.

2. Literature review

Although different terms relating food and tourism are possible to apply like “culinary tourism”, “gastronomy tourism”, “gastro-tourism”, “wine tourism”, “food tourism”, and “gourmet tourism” (Sormaz et al 2016), the authors deliberately used the term “gastronomy tourism,” rather than “food” or “culinary,” because in the same line and view as De Jong et al (2018) “gastronomy” is understood as “all-encompassing in its approach to food and drink, relating to the cultural and material processes through which certain things become consumable (Scarpato, 2002). Gastronomy, as here understood, encapsulates everything relating to the nourishment of individuals” (De Jong et al, p. 133).

“Gastronomic tourism” is a holistic concept that could be defined as “being in pursuit of unique experience of eating and drinking” (Sormaz et al 2016 p.726). It includes visiting food producers, food festivals, restaurants and other places related to some special and unique foods together with tasting a special dish, observing its production and preparation processes or eating a special dish from the hands of a very famous chef as well as seeing how a certain dish is being prepared (Hall et al.2003; Hall & Mitchell, 2005).

Despite of the current interest about gastronomy in tourism, that was not the case in the past were it was perceived more in its functional dimension. However “the positioning of food and gastronomy in the tourism field has changed substantially, as destinations have increasingly recognised their potential as a major attraction for visitors and as a means of making places distinctive in an increasingly crowded global marketplace” (Richards, 2015, p.2).

Currently, gastronomic tourism is understood as one of the main motivations for the selection of the destination by the tourists. The concept involves now a strong experiential dimension and a connection with the local culture of the regions. Gastronomy has become an indispensable element to know and understand the culture and lifestyle of a territory, so it involves a set of traditional values associated with new trends in tourism, such as respect for culture and tradition, a style healthy living, authenticity, sustainability and above all experience. (UNWTO, 2012). In fact food can be “considered as a reflection of the culture of a country and its people” (du Rand & Heath, 2006, p.207).

The strong connection between food and regional development is also well documented (Hall et al, 2003a; Richards, 2002; Scarpato, 2002). The future of peripheral regions, which are increasingly deruralized, will involve the valorization of endogenous resources and products as differentiating elements and connecting to the territory, in a strategy of identity affirmation and as an added value that contributes to a sustainable future, to the improvement of conditions and the quality of life of the population and for tourism development. Tourists looking for the authenticity of a place tend to spend more and distinguish themselves more evenly across territories and promoting a greater impact on the entire tourism value chain (Correia & Brito, 2009).

Since the local are at the heart of the uniqueness and all intangibilities associated to gastronomy, this regional development should be not only based in the local culture and heritage but it must be aligned with the characteristics and complexities of the region, and should not be out of step with its history, its values and culture (Correia & Brito, 2020).

3. Data and Method

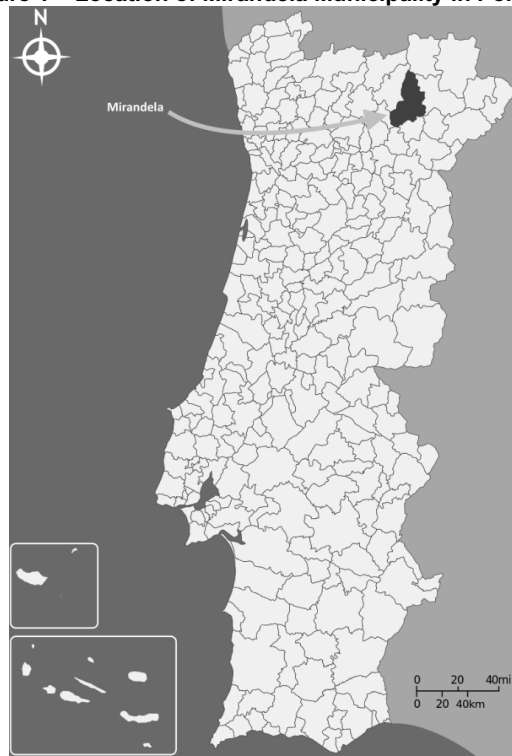
The purpose of the study was, among others, to survey the main gastronomic references of one of Portugal's most gastronomically iconic municipalities: Mirandela. Another central goal was to obtain data from 2 sociological profiles: the inhabitants, with their “know-how” and other stakeholders according to their areas of competence - political, technical, academic and social - to confirm or invalidate the degree of alignment of the

different perspectives and to find the most relevant points of convergence and/or divergence about the perceptions related to the enhancement of the gastronomic heritage of Mirandela municipality.

A qualitative methodology was adopted and a case study approach was chosen, due to its ability to capture the dynamics of the phenomenon under study (Eisenhardt, 1989). One of the advantages of case studies is the use of multiple sources of information for the research (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

The case study was about in Mirandela a municipality on the north-eastern (Figure 1) part of Portugal which historical cultural heritage combined with the natural resources comprise factors of differentiation and attractiveness of the territory.

Figure 1 – Location of Mirandela Municipality in Portugal



Source: Adapted from Wikipedia

As Mirandela is a vast territory, the authors selected a number of parishes that were considered as representative of the entire municipality. Thus, it was decided to apply the interviews in five parishes (out of a total of thirty). We selected São Pedro Velho, to the north, Avantos and Romeu, to the east, Abreiro to the south, Suçães, to the west and the county seat, Mirandela (Figure 2), in a logic of covering the county spectrum according to the cardinal points.

Figure 2 – Mirandela analysed parishes



Source: AMTQT

The technique of collecting information relied on semi-structured interviews, to the local inhabitants (9 interviews) and to several stakeholders with knowledge about the needs and interests of the tourist demand related with gastronomy (10 interviews) (Table 1). All the interviews were conducted between July and October 2018.

Regarding the local inhabitants we use as a selection criteria that they should have more than 50 years old, born or live in the parish and have knowledge about the food traditions of the region. For the stakeholders we considered the collaboration of the presidents of the selected parishes to be essential in order to help with their knowledge to the selection of the inhabitants and to validate some of the information collected. On the other hand, the collaboration and support of the Municipality Executive was considered essential, to know defined political lines or to be defined in this scope.

Table 1 – Interviews

1st Group: local inhabitants	
9 local inhabitants	More than 50 years old, born or living in the parish, knowledge about the food traditions.
2nd Group: stakeholders with a closer connection to consumer	
5 presidents of the selected parishes	
Vera Preto	Mirandela Municipality representative for Culture and Tourism
Virgílio Gomes	Professor of food history
António Monteiro	Grand Master of the Confraternity of Enophiles and Gastronomers of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro.
António Bóia Martins	Chef
Alexandre Ferreira	Chef

Source: The authors

Then we selected a Professor of food history and the grand Master of the Confraternity of Enophiles and Gastronomers of the region and two Chefs who provide an eclectic view about the problem under analysis.

With the information collected from the interviews we proceeded to a Simple Content Analysis using the MAXQDA qualitative analysis program.

4. Results

4.1 Main gastronomic references

Typical local products represent a cultural and identity heritage, conveyed through recipes passed down from generation to generation. It is generally mentioned that there is a clear need to use typical local products in the preparation of the recipes.

The main reasons for use and consumption are based on tradition, with some diversity, but in relation to products, “what the land gives”, depending on seasonality and depending on the circumstances and the time of the year.

The main gastronomic references, according to the answers obtained, pass through the “rancho” (pork meat with pasta, potatoes and chickpeas), “feijoada” (beans with pork meat), “leitão”(roasted piglet), goatling, lamb, sausages (where it is include the famous – “alheira”), and “milhos” (pork meat and sausages with corn).

Also worth mentioning the codfish, which obviously does not originate in the region, but that is part of the historical tradition of local food, due to widespread consumption in earlier times. Its affordable price, accessibility and durability when the use of salt was

the only way to preserve food, make it particularly popular in this region. In this context (use of codfish) all natives/residents mentioned dishes (as soup of codfish) where it's used together with local ingredients. Noteworthy for the use of olive oil (raw or cooked), in almost all proposals, as well as garlic in terms of condiments.

The collection of recipes is an eminently family legacy, mainly obtained through direct family members (mainly grandparents) or close friends, orally or through direct observation. In some cases, a historical reference is also associated to that collection, such as the case of cereals mowing event.

The products, methods and techniques are similar in all the analysed parishes. The predominance of the same products appears across the entire municipality, regardless of territorial location. The quality of the products, their history and diversity were mentioned as the distinctive brand of the region.

4.2 The Vision of the Stakeholders

It was recognized that the traditional cuisine of Mirandela Municipality is not yet sufficiently valued. This statement is clear in the following comments by the interviews:

"In my opinion there is no real appreciation for this type of gastronomy. Due to the lack of knowledge or choice, our traditional cuisine does not have the prominent place in the Portuguese gastronomic panorama that the so-called contemporary traditional cuisine has." Chef António Bóia

"Traditional food is not properly divulged and we are increasingly observing mass consumption without any concern for the origin and authenticity of the products." President of Abreiro Parish

Regarding the perception of the touristic demand behaviour the stakeholders characterized it by:

- Increase in recent years;
- Gastronomic experiences as a specific category of tourism;
- Wanting to know the local, regional, national history;
- Want proximity to the daily life of local populations;
- More Healthy and sustainable lifestyle.

The following sentence by chef António Bóia summarizes well the trend identified in touristic demand:

"They want to have traditional cooking experiences to better understand the habits and culture of a people." Chef António Bóia

There is also a common opinion among the stakeholders that the local offer is not oriented towards the consumer or for the preservation of tradition/cultural heritage. All respondents identified the sector of gastronomy professionals, public schools and municipalities as having a fundamental role for that alignment and preservation. The creation of a gastronomic offer that, through tourism, incites greater economic dynamism in rural areas around typical products is encouraged. Within the scope of schools, it is proposed to include classes on careful eating and on heritage and gastronomic tradition. Concerning the perception of the influence of different contexts of evolution and global change all the interviews identify the following ones as with the capacity to influence the traditional gastronomy:

- Emergence of new products;
- Change of the environment;
- Cultural influences;
- New forms of transport;

- Free circulation of products;
- Best equipment and technologies
- More information and knowledge.

The position of the inhabitants, who argued that the methods and techniques of the old days should be practically unchanged, under penalty of distorting the quality and authenticity, was identified as the main divergence between the 2 groups regarding the adaptation to the new context. Indeed, the remaining respondents, namely chefs, argue that it is essential to innovate methods and techniques for the benefit of that same quality, with the potential offered by new concepts (e.g. the evolution in the seasoning of the “sufficiently” concept for the accuracy of the measurement) and the use of new support instruments (e.g. probes for temperature control) as a product enhancement, but always respecting its authenticity.

5. Conclusions

Gastronomy is relevant to tourism, the preservation and dissemination of intangible cultural heritage, and the inclusion of the local communities in an interactive process of improving their living conditions, is essential for sustainable development. It is a matter of collective action, aggregated in the recognition of the role of typical food as a differentiating and identity element.

We are aware that each region must define and classify its products and offers, giving them an integrated consistency. On the other hand, it must rank its offer in terms of importance and impact in relation to potential markets and segments.

In peripheral territories, the role of local authorities is a critical factor. Inertia, apathy and inoperability, often superior to those of the central power, are impediments to any possibility of development. In addition to the importance of public authorities, the essential role of the inhabitants is clear, and they should be informed about the intrinsic value of their contribution (Correia & Brito, 2017).

In the case of Mirandela Municipality we recognize that the characteristics of the intangible heritage are inducers of the possibility of developing attractive tourist experiences, in terms of gastronomic and cultural tourism, boosted by the appetite of the tourist markets for this segment, considered as the one with the greatest growth in the tourism industry as a whole. However, there are transversal constraints: the need to promote the training of resources (technical and human), the use of available support to ensure a higher quality of the service provided, the urgency of involving all stakeholders, the use of new technologies in a integrated communication methodology, well-defined lines of conduct in a global and concerted strategy among all stakeholders. Indeed, the creation of interaction mechanisms between the different operators is essential to guarantee an integrated and qualified service that will allow attracting tourists.

It is understood, therefore, based on the research that is being presented, that Mirandela, should define strategies and actions to enhance a competitive, differentiating and sustainable tourist-gastronomic offer, which values the attractiveness of its territory and the differentiation of endogenous products.

In view of these assumptions, it seems imperative in the short and medium term to develop some of the following actions:

- Strengthen information and awareness campaigns with restaurants and other important suppliers.
- Restaurants should be understood as a space for experimentation, innovation and creativity, and they should be motivated to implement a greater connection between the traditional recipes and the new kitchen trends.
- Inventory and systematization of resources.
- Connection of the various dishes to their history, to the symbolic they contain and the time of year and festivities in which they were cooked and served.

- Collection and documentary analysis of Mirandela gastronomy, from products related to recipes, moments, places and traditions.
- Characterization of the forms of intergenerational and intergroup transmission of knowledge

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