

DEVELOPMENT OF AGRITOURISM THROUGH THE CONCEPT OF LOCAL GASTRONOMY POINTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses issues regarding the new government initiative Local Gastronomic Points to develop rural areas with agritourism potential in Romania by highlighting the local gastronomy. The main objective of this research is to identify how the concept of Local Gastronomic Points is perceived in terms of the opinion of the owners who manage such businesses and to identify the implications of this concept in the development of agritourism. In this respect, qualitative marketing research based on the semi-structured interview method was conducted at the level of the rural tourist destination Vama Buzaului, Romania. The main conclusion of the study is that the Local Gastronomic Points is an initiative that demonstrates that it can generate horizontal development of the rural areas and the development of agritourism. The research results revealed that this concept enhances the local community and gastronomy. Starting from these results, we propose to design a unitary Gastro Local concept at the county level, which should include specific requirements regarding the culinary preparations and services, the standardization of the marking and signalling of these Points, and intense activity of information and tourist promotion. The results of the study are conclusive and relevant for stakeholders in agritourism, for the responsible public authorities in the field of tourism, to develop competitive rural tourist destinations. The paper also offers future research directions.

Key words: agritourism, rural areas, local gastronomy

JEL codes: O18, Q56, Z31, Z32

INTRODUCTION

The field of tourism and hospitality is undergoing a profound process of transformation in recent years. In the context of increasing the diversity of services in the tourism industry and the requirements of tourists, continuous transformations are needed in tourist destinations, especially those located in rural areas, to increase their competitive advantage. One of the approaches refers to the development of agritourism by emphasizing the importance given to local gas-

tronomy, in the context of the increased interest of tourists to experience traditional products and local recipes.

Agritourism must be understood as a package of social and cultural measures, sports services, and activities specific to the economic field and the geographical environment, provided for tourists and carried out in conditions of minimal investment and environmental conservation (Nedelea, 2007). In agritourism, constant changes are necessary, the agritourism farms must constantly change and try to surprise

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tourists with new products and offers (Roman and Grudzień, 2021). Assessing the potential of agritourism in terms of innovation requires a close look at the specific characteristics of the agritourism market, both on the demand side and on the supply side (Roman, Roman and Prus, 2020).

In this sense, in Romania, at the level of 2017, the governmental initiative Local Gastronomic Points was developed. The Local Gastronomic Points initiative responds to the growing demand in Romania for the organization of family-type public catering units, offering food products and preparations specific to geographical areas, in compliance with certain rules and conditions of hygiene, so that food is safe and the health of consumers should not suffer (ANSVSA, 2017).

The purpose of this paper is to understand how the concept of Local Gastronomic Points is perceived in terms of the opinion of the owners who manage such businesses and to identify implications of this concept in the development of agritourism.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Agritourism is a form of tourism, practiced in rural areas, based on providing, within the peasant household, the services of accommodation, meals, and leisure. Agritourism capitalizes on the natural and anthropic resources of the area, contributing to raising the living standards of the rural population (Talaba et al., 2013). In an age when most people in industrialized countries live in urban or suburban areas, for rural residents, agritourism (farm or farm tourism) – niche ecotourism – has become one of the fastest-growing segments in the travel industry (Flanigan, Blackstock and Hunter, 2014). 'A viable rural tourism can help socio-economic development of localities, but only if other conditions are fulfilled: a modern infrastructure for communications and transport, sewerage people open-minded but conservative in places that give charm to a local without kitsch, providing at least modest accommodation conditions, keeping the local architecture of the buildings, the principles travel arrangement; the existence of authentic traditions, craftsmen, handicraft workshops, animation tourist; the existence of marketing strategies, social media,

and public relations campaigns' (Gavrilă-Paven, 2015). Agritourism can provide additional jobs for rural residents because it generates the development of sectors related to tourism, especially services, trade, food services, processing of agricultural products, traditional crafts, etc. (Marin, 2015).

Agritourism, as a form of service, can be developed in any geographical region that has preserved its unaltered natural landscapes, the existence of a specific and original way of life, and preserves its historical monuments, traditions, and customs. Climate and landscapes, cultural and culinary traditions, folklore and ethnography, ceramics, hunting and fishing opportunities, vineyards and fruit cultivation, but also other resources in rural areas make Romania have multiple possibilities for agritourism.

Mainly through this form of tourism, small accommodation units, public catering, and the development of specific means of recreation supported by the locals are encouraged.

Due to the growing interest of the public to reconnect with their roots and learn about local food and farming systems, agritourism can stimulate rural development, offering various opportunities to create more types of business opportunities (Halim et al., 2020). 'Today people are becoming interested in gastronomic topics, such as reconstruction and conservation of cultural traditions, authentic cuisine, gastronomic customs and traditions at local, regional or national scale, and promotion of local products' (Rivza et al., 2017). Tourists agree that local cuisine is an important part of the culture of the region and that the taste experience is important to the overall experience of the journey (Velissariou and Vasilaki, 2014). Scientific literature abounds today in papers devoted to gastronomy in the different aspects, as well as gastronomic tourism (Lopez-Guzman, Mogollón and Di-Clemente, 2014; Su, 2015; Pavlidis and Markantonatou, 2020), local food, and the tourism experience (Sims, 2009; Seongseop et al., 2016; Seongseop et al., 2020) or gastronomic cultural heritage (Jeroscenkova et al., 2016; Kruzmetra, Rivza and Foris, 2018).

The enhancement of local gastronomy through the concept of Local Gastronomic Point for the development of agritourism did not have been still studied.

The Local Gastronomic Point is a new concept in Romania. At a Local Gastronomic Point, tourists can eat at a local's house. Local Gastronomic Points (LGP) 'a place for preserving the local tradition', is a concept developed by the National Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority (ANSVSA), based on the Principle of European flexibility. The Local Gastronomic Points have started operating in Romania since the beginning of 2018. Local Gastronomic Points (LGP) are not considered restaurants. The LGP has the following characteristics: (a) a unique menu and a limited assortment range. The menu of gastronomic points is different from that of restaurants. The local gastronomic point has a daily menu with a limited range (1 kind of soup, 1 main course, and 1 dessert); the food will preferably be eaten on the same day; (b) the methods of preparing the menu shall be as traditional as possible, specific to the area, respecting the conditions of hygiene at the time of preparation; (c) is addressed to a limited number of final consumers; (d) the food is produced from raw materials obtained mainly from primary production, at the level of the own holding. The specific conditions regarding the development of an LGP type business (ANSVSA, 2017) are: (1) Those who want to set up these local gastronomic points must constitute a form of legal organization, such as Family Association, Individual Authorized or Trading Company; (2) Considering these types of activities go beyond the framework of private consumption, it is necessary to obtain the veterinary sanitary registration document and for food safety, following ANSVSA Order 111/2008; (3) In the Local Gastronomic Point the food must be prepared only by the owner, or by the members of his family, and their state of health must be checked periodically; (4) The raw materials from which the food is prepared must come only from units authorized/registered for veterinary health and food safety, focusing on those local products, specific to the area where the gastronomic point operates. Until now, ANSVSA has authorized in Romania over 30 LGP. The Intereg Europe – ThreeT Project is underway at the level of Brasov County, one of the actions of this project is 'Creating a network of Local Gastronomic Points in Brasov County'. Vama Buzaului immediately agreed

to this project and the Local Gastro Association was founded in 2019. Vama Buzaului is a destination located in rural areas, which recently holds the title of Tourist resort of local interest. Vama Buzaului is a village of Brasov County, Romania, which is crossed annually by about 50 thousand tourists, attracted especially by the Bison reservation. Tourists arriving at the Vama Buzaului tourist destination can eat at several LGP, where the housewives in the village prepare traditional food. The households where the traditional meal can be served have as a distinctive sign a panel with a rooster at the gate. So far, the Gastro Local project has been implemented in 11 households in Vama Buzaului, with 11 accredited LGP and 4 more in the process of accreditation. The menus are fixed, they are displayed on the gate, and the tourists who arrive in the rural tourist destination Vama Buzaului thus can eat homemade dishes, vegetables, fish, and meat from animals raised in the own households of the locals. The purpose of this paper is to understand how the concept of Local Gastro is perceived by those who are involved in this program in Vama Buzaului and to identify the implications of this concept in the development of agritourism.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Considering the research purpose – mentioned before, the research objectives were set, as follows: (O1) Identifying the motivation of the owners to join the Local Gastro Project; (O2) Identification of the origin of the recipes and ingredients used in LGPs; (O3) Identification of the methods used to promote the Local Gastronomic Points.

To achieve the research goals, descriptive research was conducted using the qualitative method of the interview, within the theoretical framework of Galletta and Cross (2013), the technique of the semi-structured interview, the tool being the interview guide. The data were collected from May to June 2020 from a sample of 6 owners of LGP from Vama Buzaului, located in Brasov County – one of the most important touristic regions of Romania. The selection of participants was based on the official list of the 11 LGP from Vama Buzaului. The interviews were conducted

by a qualified moderator using the interview guide designed to assure the objectives' achievement. In conducting the research, the ethical guidelines were adhered to. Participants were provided with information about the context and purpose of the study, and they were also informed that their participation was voluntary.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The obtained data were analysed following the analytical framework proposed by Galletta and Cross (2013). The research results are structured by considering every objective stated based on the answers to the research questions.

(O1) Identifying the motivation of the owners to join the Local Gastro Project

The reasons why the respondents chose to open a Local Gastronomic Point were various: the passion for cooking, the desire to do something else, the lack of occupation, obtaining an additional income: 'The desire to do something else, and the fact that it represents an extra income for our family' (#2). In the community from Vama Buzaului, most women are housewives taking care of children and the household. This concept brought the chance for housewives to make better use of the time they spend at home and to obtain income from this activity, therefore, new jobs are created. The passion for cooking is the factor that united this community of ladies and led to the establishment of the Local Gastro Association Vama Buzaului in 2019.

Respondents said that the greatest satisfaction they have as owners of Gastro Local is that their work is appreciated, and people who cross their threshold enjoy their food and leave happy. 'Being able to bring joy and contentment to someone's soul is a great thing' (#3) says one of the respondents. They also feel fulfilled by the fact that they have the opportunity to meet new people with whom they socialize and find information on gastronomic habits in the regions where tourists come from. Last but not least, they feel great satisfaction because they have the opportunity to do something for the community they belong to.

(O2) Identification of the origin of the recipes and ingredients used in LGPs

The whole Local Gastro concept is based on traditional recipes: 'Old recipes, everything that is traditional because that's the main idea at the Local Gastro, to have traditional food, made by us with what we have at home, how we cook for ourselves is how we cook for our guests' (#4). The recipes that housewives use are inherited and learned from generation to generation, from grandparents, mothers, or aunts. From soups to donuts and cakes there is a tradition in everything. In the community of the Local Gastro Association, it is cooked in this way, according to recipes inherited from the family, with old and most important recipes, with ingredients from their production or neighbours. Three-quarters of the families in the community raise animals in their household, have sheepfolds, and practice agriculture, fish farming.

The most requested menu differs from house to house, but the resistance piece is definitely 'bulz' (Romanian traditional food with polenta and sheep cheese), in the locality the cheese is a very good one. 'They like "bulz", we have very good cheese in the area, and if there is no "bulz" on the menu, people ask us if we don't have cheese for sale, or from where they can buy it' (#1). Also, soups, fried fish, meat, or other homemade drinks, like sour cherry liqueur are always at the top of tourists' preferences: 'I make a lot of "ciorba", and people say they are very good. Egg ciorba, salad ciorba, beans ciorba, all are prepared in my way and are always appreciated, therefore, many ladies have asked for the recipe' (#4); 'tourists ask about drinks, if we have homemade "visinata" (cherry brandy) or "afinata" (bilberry) and they ask for these because they are better and more natural than the ones sold in the market' (#2). Always using fresh, organic ingredients that come from people's well-groomed gardens, the food can only be delicious, like at home of mom or even grandma.

Between 60% and 80% of the ingredients comes from people's households, either from their own or from other local producers: 'We use 70–80% of what we have here locally' (#4); 'We don't buy, we use what we have here in the garden, what is produced in the local farms and that's all we need for a good meal' (#5). The rest is bought from supermarkets, especial-

ly what they cannot produce, here, for example, sugar or oil. About 20 families in the commune own and care for solariums that serve the community. The climate is not perfect for agriculture but with the help of solariums even peppers, eggplants, tomatoes, cucumbers, and much more are produced. Dairy products come from the many sheepfolds owned by families in the Vama Buzaului community.

(O3) Identification of the methods used to promote the Local Gastronomic Points

Respondents believe that the most effective advertisement is the man who leaves their yard satisfied: 'When someone tells that they have been our guests, surely more people will come' (#5). Word of mouth is one of the most effective forms of promotion in this sector of agritourism. The time that Gastro Local owners spend on social networks is limited due to the multiple activities they carry out in their households during the day. Respondents also said that the concept is promoted by the mayor of the village, who participates in TV shows, gives interviews to various newspapers and online news platforms, and also manages the Facebook page – Gastro Local Vama Buzaului: 'We advertise through quality, the guests are spreading the word that the food is good and that we offer good hospitality, services the host welcoming the mayor manages the Facebook and news activities' (#3).

CONCLUSIONS

The main conclusion of the study is that the Local Gastronomic Points is a Romanian initiative that demonstrates that it can generate horizontal development of the rural areas, by creating new jobs, by contributing of the locals who produce the agricultural products necessary for the activity of these LGP and to generate the development of the agritourism at the national level.

The establishment of Local Gastronomic Points, the initiative that helps the development of agritourism, can provide additional jobs for rural residents because it generates activities related to tourism, especially services, trade, food services, processing of agricultural products, etc. These results confirm those of Marin (2015). Moreover, this initiative creates new

business opportunities in the rural areas, which confirms the study of Halim et al. (2020).

The results of the study, regarding the increasing role of women in agritourism, also expand their significant involvement in the development of tourist destinations and rural development, which confirms the study of Halim et al. (2020).

The results reveal that this concept enhances the community and local cuisine. Gastro Local is a project recently started at Vama Buzaului, which is already enjoying success, being able to become an example of good practices for the development of Local Gastronomic Points in as many rural tourist destinations both in Brasov County and at the level of the whole country. At the level of Brasov county, we propose to design a unitary Gastro Local concept, which should include specific requirements regarding culinary preparations and services, standardization of marking and signalling these LGP, and an intense tourist information and promotion activity to determine the desire to experiment at tourists, thus highlighting both the cultural and gastronomic heritage and local producers.

The results of the study are conclusive and relevant for agritourism stakeholders, for the responsible public authorities in the field of tourism, to develop competitive rural tourist destinations. From an academic point of view, this study helps to strengthen existing studies on agritourism development in rural destinations and provides the basis for future research. This study presents some limitations. The main limitation of this research is generated by the fact that the sampling for analysis was made up only of owners of LGP, and another limitation is that the research was conducted only at the level of a single tourist destination, in one country, Romania. Future research could be extended to complete this study. The authors aim to continue research on this topic, including qualitative and quantitative studies, and to investigate the presence of other variables in these studies, such as the opinion of stakeholders at the destination level in Romania and other states, and to expand research to other destinations.

Also, the authors intend to go further regarding the research of the Local Gastronomic Points through the experience of tourists, their preferences, and expectations, to improve this concept.

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