EXAMINING MOTIVES AND PERCEPTION OF DOMESTIC VISITORS TO GASTRONOMY MANIFESTATIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

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Abstract:
Contemporary trends in the tourist market indicate that today's tourists do not only expect the satisfaction of their needs for rest and recreation from travel but also a unique and unforgettable experience. In this sense, gastronomy is one of the elements of the tourist offer, which can provide tourists with a quality experience through the presentation and consumption of authentic local cuisine. Tourist destinations most often promote their gastronomic offer through the organization of events, which, in addition to presenting local cuisine, include various entertainment for visitors. The subject of research in this paper is the motivation and perception of domestic visitors to gastronomic events in the Republic of Serbia, on whose territory a large number of food and beverage festivals are organized every year. The primary goal of the research relates to the examination of key factors that influence the decision to visit gastronomic events in Serbia, as well as the importance of certain elements of the event. The results of the research indicated that local gastronomic specialties, the diversity of the gastronomic offer, the venue, and the atmosphere are the main factors that influence the decision of domestic visitors to attend gastronomic events in the Republic of Serbia. When it comes to the importance of certain elements of gastronomic events, the views of the visitors indicate that the most important is the quality of the engaged staff, the quality of the food, the variety and organization of the event program, and the taste and variety of the food. Based on the results of the research, the limitations of the research as well as the guidelines for future research on this topic are defined.

Keywords:
gastronomic events, motivation, perceptions, domestic visitors, Republic of Serbia.

INTRODUCTION

Gastronomy implies food recognition of a certain area as well as the way of preparation, presentation, and consumption of food (Kivela & Scott, 2006). Gastronomy represents not only the culture of food and the satisfaction of one of the basic needs of every person (Božić & Milošević, 2021) but also in recent times an integral part of the destination´s tourist offer. This segment of the offer, in addition to providing one of the basic services for tourists during their stay in a certain destination, can also influence the creation of a new experience for tourists, especially in the case of those who are looking for something new and unique. Therefore, when it comes to tourists, food consumption is interpreted in two ways, in terms of satisfying basic needs but also as

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DOI: 10.15308/Sitcon-2023-11-21

an attraction that makes tourists decide to visit a certain place (Rabotić, 2013). From a cultural aspect, food is a part of the cultural identity of a nation, and gastronomic regionality contributes to the diversity that makes a country or place richer and more interesting (Žuvela, 2019). This term is a relatively complex term because it is linked to several different forms of tourism such as rural and/or cultural. In addition, the gastronomy of a destination is not only part of the offer of various facilities and activities for tourists, but also represents a way of presenting the culture, traditions, and customs of a place. According to Correia *et al.* (2008), gastronomy represents an opportunity for diversification of the tourist offer, local economic development, the inclusion of different sectors of food production in the development, and contribution to the overall economic development of a certain place. Such an interpretation of gastronomy indicates that the offer of food and beverages is much more than the process of production and consumption, as it includes various segments of the inclusion of gastronomy in providing a tourist experience. Therefore, the combination of tourism and gastronomy is interpreted as a trip to a place rich in gastronomic resources, which makes it possible not only to satisfy the need for food and beverages but also to create a gastronomic experience for tourists through visiting food producers, buying local specialties and products, visiting gastronomic events, fairs, tastings food, local food preparation courses, etc. (Hall & Mitchell, 2005; Lee *et al.*, 2015). In relation to other forms of tourism, gastronomic tourism is a specific form of tourism, which is based on using existing resources to provide experience and knowledge for a new generation of tourists, who expect to experience something new during their journey, respectively to experience new and exotic cuisines characteristic for particular destinations. Gastronomic tourism has a significant potential for development at the global level, bearing in mind that it provides one of the basic services necessary for tourists, but it also represents one of the primary motives for travel in recent times. Also, gastronomic tourism can strengthen attractiveness of the destination through the introduction of new gastronomic products and facilities (Zrnić *et al.*, 2023). The specificity of this form of tourism is reflected in the fact that during the journey, tourists get to know different ways of life, and cultures, based on which they gain new experiences and knowledge (Chang *et al.*, 2010; Filiposki *et al.*, 2017). According to statistical data, the importance of the development of gastronomic tourism is reflected in the creation of additional economic value for destinations, which in 2020 at the global level amounted to 25%. Also, as many as 53% of leisure tourists are food travellers at the same time, while the newer generations of tourists, for example, millennials, expect different services when it comes to food and drinks compared to traditional ones such as socially responsible restaurants (World Food Travel Association, 2020). Gastronomy is an increasingly prevalent motive for travel, considering that 15% of tourists on a global level travel to a certain destination precisely for the gastronomic experience (Berbel-Pineda *et al.*, 2019). Gastronomic tourism has multiple benefits for the destination, which uses its local cuisine in order to diversify itself compared to competition, which relates to economic development, strengthening of cultural identity, involvement of the local population in the development of tourism, branding of the destination, revitalization of underdeveloped areas, etc

One of the presentation forms of a certain destination's local cuisine of is the organization of events, where authentic gastronomic specialties and products are promoted to a wider audience with the aim of attracting tourists to the destination and achieving economic benefits through the consumption and sale of food. Gastronomic manifestations are focused on agriculture, cooking, and gastronomy with the presentation and preparation of specific products for a certain area (cheeses, wines, desserts, cooked dishes, etc.) (Banjac *et al.*, 2016). From the experience aspect, this type of event aims to impress visitors with a special gastronomic offer, excite their senses and leave them with unforgettable memories (Topole *et al.*, 2021). Gastronomic manifestations connect local cuisine and travel in a very special way, which further implies that a large number of people gather in the same place with the aim of consuming, enjoying food, or observing the process of preparing traditional dishes, but also using various entertainment facilities (Čavić & Mandarić, 2021). In this sense, this type of event can contribute to the extension of the tourist season, attracting more tourists, but also branding the destination with the aim of achieving long-term effects from tourism development. Bearing in mind all of the above, this paper analyzes the motivation and perceptions of domestic visitors to gastronomic events in the Republic of Serbia. The location of the research was chosen based on the fact that the Republic of Serbia has developed gastronomy with a large number of traditional dishes and products, which can be placed on the wider market through tourism. The comparative advantage of Serbia when it comes to gastronomy is reflected in the wealth of autochthonous varieties of fruits and vegetables, wine and brandy, traditional dishes, and other products, while the combination of gastronomic offer with cultural, historical, and ethnographic heritage is

also an important advantage (Stojanović, 2017; Janković *et al.*, 2020). The food culture in Serbia, including traditional dishes and preparation techniques, is part of the intangible cultural heritage and is characterized by numerous specificities, which originate from historical trends and events in the past, and are conditioned by the geographical position that Serbia occupies (Kilibarda *et al.*, 2018).

An important segment of gastronomic tourism in the Republic of Serbia are precisely gastronomic manifestations, which are organized throughout the year in different parts of the country. According to the data presented in the Calendar of Events for 2023 (Tourist Organization of Serbia, 2023), more than 150 different food and drink festivals, food fairs, bazaars, fairs, culinary competitions, etc. are held in Serbia. Despite the existence of a wide range of gastronomic manifestations, a large number of them are of a local character and are not the object of interest of tourists, as a result of which almost all the positive effects of the organization of this type of event are absent. Therefore, it is important to consider and define the directions of further development with the aim of better positioning the Republic of Serbia as a gastronomic tourism destination at the international level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given that almost every tourist destination has certain specific characteristics of local cuisine, today events related to food are very popular among tourists, where they can consume certain dishes, observe the preparation process of these dishes, and also buy products that are characteristic of that particular destination. Events are an integral element of gastronomic tourism, which is generally known to represent a journey motivated by the consumption of food and beverages (Kanjeluk *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, gastronomic manifestations include all events that are connected with food and beverages, but also with the sale of food prepared according to local and traditional recipes, which in this way present local tradition to tourists (Stanišić, *et al.*, 2018). Gastronomic manifestations include a wide range of different events, which can be classified as fairs, festivals, and cultural and industrial events with frequent or sporadic organizational dynamics (Zrnić *et al.*, 2021). The tradition of preparing local food, which has been represented for a long time in a certain place, can be used to organize events, which will be part of the tourist offer and organized continuously, which gives the gastronomic heritage its economic valorization. In addition to food and beverages, which are the basic element according to which the concept of the manifestation is created, an important factor of gastronomic manifestations is also the venue, that is, an environment that has a pleasant character and allows tourists to feel and experience the spirit of the local community (Wu *et al.*, 2013; Duvnjak *et al.*, 2014). The organization of food festivals, as well as other forms of presentation of local cuisine, can influence the strengthening of the pride and attachment of the local community, given that this type of manifestation is part of the cultural heritage of a certain place. In recent times, gastronomic events are a useful instrument for improving the existing tourist offer and attracting tourists, whose primary motive for traveling is precisely related to gastronomy. Also, they can influence the development of awareness among tourists about certain products with which they were not familiar, which can further influence the preference for certain gastronomic manifestations (Čavić *et al.*, 2021). Food festivals as a form of food tourism can play an important role in presenting new tastes to tourists as well as introducing them to different customs (Vukić *et al.*, 2015). One of the primary purposes of gastronomic manifestations is the presentation of local products with the aim of providing a market for producers, enabling participants to establish cooperation with other producers (Lesić, 2019). In addition to tourists, an important group of stakeholders consists of food and beverage exhibitors, who promote local values and cuisine, thus encouraging economic development and building an image. Gastronomic manifestations also contribute to the revitalization of various economic activities, which develop at the local level, influence the launch of new sectors, and represent a significant source of income for food producers (Gómez *et al.*, 2023). In addition, these events can influence the more intensive development of entrepreneurship, innovation, and the involvement of the population in the production and sale of food and beverages. The economic aspect of gastronomic manifestations is particularly prominent when it comes to rural areas, whose local cuisine is very often the basic element of creating the concept of gastronomic manifestations (Banjac *et al.*, 2020; Stojanović *et al.*, 2020). The growing interest of tourists in visiting gastronomic events indicates the necessity of researching the motivation of tourists and the way of making decisions about visiting gastronomic events. Understanding the motivation of visitors

is very useful for event organizers because based on the analysis of visitor profiles, they will be able to define more efficient marketing strategies and promotional campaigns (Chang, 2011). Investigating the motivation and attitudes of visitors to food festivals in the Republic of Serbia, Gagić *et al.*, (2013) concluded that the primary motives are the products, which are presented and sold at the events, entertainment, and the possibility of temporarily not being occupied with everyday duties. According to Jung *et al.* (2015), the quality of food and accompanying content are key reasons that influence the decision about visiting gastronomic events. Important aspects of the motivation for visiting gastronomic events refer to traveling with the family, enjoying gastronomy; getting to know the local cultural heritage; resting and relaxing, new acquaintances, (Park, *et al.*, 2008: Chang, 2011; Ramukumba, 2017; Krajíčková & Šauer, 2018; Folgado-Fernández *et al.*, 2019; Stojanović *et al.*, 2020). According to the study by Carvache-Franco *et al.* (2023), the key dimensions of motivation when it comes to food and drink festivals are fun and novelty, especially in the case of those visitors who want to enjoy a pleasant atmosphere and discover new places that serve food. Lee (2000) compared the motivation of domestic and foreign visitors to the festival and determined the following motives: getting to know the culture, family togetherness, escape, novelty, event attractions, external group socialization, and known group socialization. The author came to the conclusion that domestic visitors are motivated to a lesser extent by learning about culture, searching for something new, and attractions. People who visit gastronomic events are motivated by multiple motives for visiting this type of event, where the focus is certainly on gastronomy and entertainment, which further provides tourists with an appropriate experience. Gastronomic manifestations represent an opportunity for tourists to achieve social interaction in a pleasant environment, satisfying the primary motives of the visit. In addition to the motivation of visitors, an important dimension of the quality of gastronomic events is related to the unification of all elements, which are important and necessary for the organization of event, as well as the satisfaction of visitors themselves. Analyzing the variables that affect the satisfaction and loyalty of festival visitors, Anil (2012), based on the conducted research, concluded that the key elements of the event are: the venue, staff, quality of information, and quality of food. Several studies have confirmed that the most important elements of the event are: the quality and variety of food, the event program, the quality of the staff, the atmosphere during the event, promotional activities, additional content, the location of the event, etc. (Son & Lee, 2011; Lee *et al.*, 2011; Cole & Illum, 2006; Tanford & Jung, 2017). The mentioned elements can have a significant impact on the satisfaction of event visitors as well as on their future intentions. According to Wan & Chan (2013), the satisfaction and loyalty of Macau food festival visitors are influenced by accessibility, food, space, ambiance, service quality, entertainment, time of event and event size. Jung *et al.* (2015) highlighted the program of events, food, and entertainment as the key slow food attributes of the festival as factors that have a direct impact on the experience and satisfaction of visitors. In the example of the Punggi Ginseng Festival (Republic of Korea), Yoon *et al.* (2010) found that the event program, the availability of souvenirs, food, and activities that provide added value have the greatest influence on the satisfaction and loyalty of visitors. On the other hand, Pai *et al.* (2021) concluded that essential component qualities of food festivals are also hospitality, venue, products, benefits, and event programs. Several different studies have pointed to the importance of the quality of food, the event program, the quality of engaged staff, the quality of services, as well as the space for events as important dimensions of the quality of gastronomic events (Lee & Arcodia, 2011; Mason & Paggiaro, 2012; Jung *et al.*, 2015; Folgado-Fernández *et al.*, 2019; Pizzichini *et al.*, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

The primary goal of the research is to examine the motivations and perceptions of local visitors to gastronomic events in the Republic of Serbia in order to examine the key components of this type of event, as well as the way in which visitors experience them. Therefore, the authors constructed a questionnaire and collected electronically 110 valid responses from domestic visitors to gastronomic events in Serbia. The survey questionnaire was formed based on the theoretical analysis of studies on this topic. The questions in the questionnaire are primarily based on the study by Çekiç (2023), in which the influence and role of gastronomic events on the motivation and perceptions of visitors was examined, using the example of the international Gastro Festival in Gaziantep (Turkey). The part of the questionnaire, which refers to the importance of individual elements of the event, was defined based on the study conducted by Marković *et al.* (2015) on the impact of food and beverage

festival quality dimensions on visitor satisfaction. The first group of questions related to their basic data, such as the type of environment they live in (urban/rural) and the number of past visits to gastronomic events in the Republic of Serbia. The next group of questions refers to specific aspects of the analysis of the research subject. The question, which refers to the key advantages of destinations that organize gastronomic events in Serbia, contains seven offered answers, of which respondents need to choose only one. The next question refers to the identification of key factors that influence the decision to visit gastronomic events, where the respondents were able to rate each of the ten defined factors using a Likert scale (1- does not affect at all to 5- completely affects). Respondents were also asked to rate fourteen elements of gastronomic events, i.e., their importance on a scale from 1- completely irrelevant to 5- completely relevant. The collected data were processed with the use of the statistical package SPSS25. Descriptive statistical analysis was used in order to calculate the average scores of all analyzed variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following, research results and discussion will be presented. The following table represents the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents (Table 1).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents (n=110).

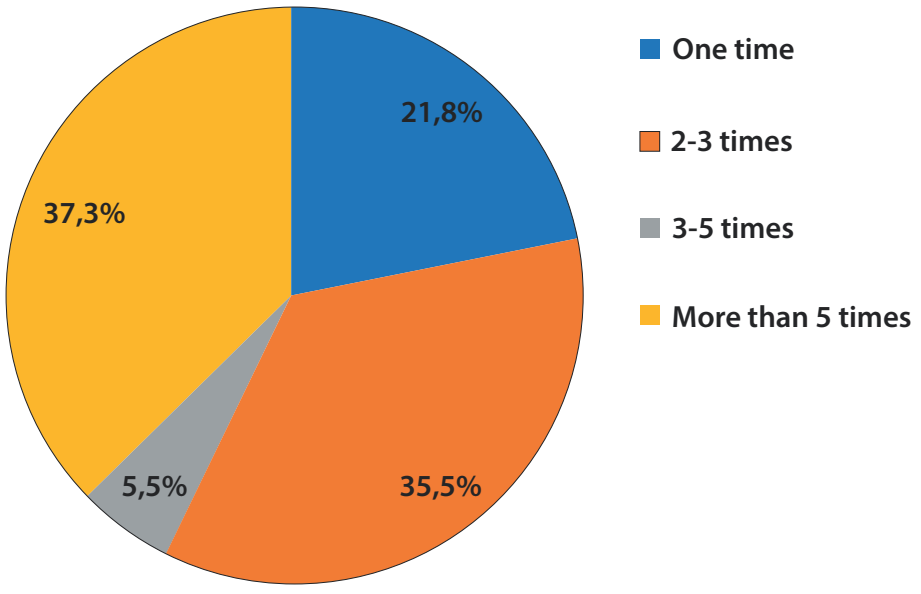
Characteristics	*n*	*%*
Gender		
Male	56	50.9
Female	54	49.1
Age		
18-29	72	65.5
30-39	24	21.8
40-49	8	7.3
50-59	6	5.5
Level of education		
High School	23	20.9
University	52	47.3
Masters	22	20.0
Doctorate	13	11.8
Type of place where respondents live		
Urban area	80	72.7
Rural area	30	27.3
Total	**110**	**100,0**

Source: Author's.

The total number of respondents is 110, of which 50,9% are male and 49,1% are female. According to age, the majority of the respondents (65.5%) belong to the age group 18-29 years of age, followed by the age group 30-39 (21.8%). Respondents aged 40-49 participated with 7.3% and 50-59 years of age with 5.5% in the total sample. In terms of the level of education, 47.3% of the respondents stated that they had graduated from university, while 11.8% have the title of Doctor of Science. When asked about the type of environment in which they live, 72.7% of respondents stated that they live in an urban environment, and 27.3% of respondents in a rural environment.

Following, the respondents were asked how many times they attended gastronomic events in the Republic of Serbia (Figure 1). According to the results, 37.3% of respondents visited them more than five times, 35.5% of respondents visited them two to three times, and 21.8% visited them once. A low 5.5% of the respondents visited gastronomic events three to five times.

Figure 1. Number of visits by domestic visitors to gastronomic events in the Republic of Serbia.



Source: Author's according to SPSS25 output.

The respondents were offered a list of ten advantages of organizing gastronomic events for destinations in the Republic of Serbia and asked to choose one they consider to be the most important for destinations (Table 2). As the most relevant the respondents chose *Destination branding and positioning on the tourist market* (29.1%) followed by the *Development of gastronomic tourism and other related forms of tourism* (22.7%) and *Promotion of tourist potential* (20.9%) and *Regional development* (11.8%). The lowest result was registered for the *Preservation of natural values and cultural heritage* (3.6%) and *Increasing economic benefits and employment of the local population* (3.6%).

Table 2. Advantages of organizing gastronomic events for destinations in the Republic of Serbia.

Advantages	Frequency	Share
Promotion of tourist potential	23	20.9
Regional development	9	8.2
Destination branding and positioning on the tourist market	32	29.1
Preservation of natural values and cultural heritage	4	3.6
Increasing economic benefits and employment of the local population	4	3.6
Creating a sense of pride among members of the local community	13	11.8
Development of gastronomic tourism and other forms of tourism related to the same	25	22.7

Source: Author's.

Following, the respondents were asked to evaluate the effect of the factors that influence their decision to visit gastronomic events in the Republic of Serbia (Table 3).

Table 3. Factors influencing the decision to visit gastronomic events.

Factors influencing the decision to visit gastronomic events	Mean	Std. Deviation
Organic food	2.78	1.266
Local gastronomic specialties	4.52	.896
A diverse gastronomic offer	4.25	1.024
Presence of products with geographical origin	3.88	1.262
Venue of the event	4.25	.921
Street food	3.00	1.157
The desire to get to know other cultures	4.12	.821
The presence of well-known chefs	3.08	1.389
Atmosphere during the event	4.22	.747
The desire to socialize with people	4.07	.945

Source: Author's.

By ranking the answers offered, the respondents rated certain factors with high average scores, which indicates that these factors have the greatest influence on the decision to visit gastronomic events in Serbia (Table 4). Local gastronomic specialties (M=4.52), Varied gastronomic offers (M=4.25), Venue of the event (M=4.25), and Atmosphere during the event (M=4.22) are, according to respondents, factors that influence the decision to visit gastronomic events in the Republic of Serbia. On the other hand, the factors that respondents consider to be less relevant refer to Organic food (M=2.78), Street food (M=3.00), and Presence of products with geographical origin (M=3.08). It is evident that the most important factors are those that have a direct connection with gastronomy.

Table 4. Importance of elements of gastronomic manifestations in the Republic of Serbia.

Element of gastronomic events	Mean	Std. Deviation
Promotional material is well prepared and provides enough information for visitors.	4.25	.795
Places where gastronomic events are held have appropriate signage with adequate and sufficient information for visitors.	4.34	.639
The program of gastronomic events is varied and well organized.	4.54	.686
The food offered and sold at gastronomic events is of very high quality.	4.61	.705
The food is tasty and very varied.	4.51	.701
Food prices, which are offered at gastronomic events, are at a reasonable level.	4.41	.758
The staff is friendly, informed and ready to provide services to visitors.	4.64	.646
The size of the area where the gastronomic events are held is generally adequate in relation to the number of visitors.	4.14	.784
Parking and toilets are provided.	4.15	.822
Mostly at gastronomic events, I get adequate value in relation to the amount of money I spend.	3.77	1.055
I generally feel good during the gastronomic events and plan my next visit.	4.01	.862
I will recommend my friends to visit gastronomic events in Serbia.	4.20	.833
In the future, I will attend various gastronomic events in Serbia.	3.83	1.057
I will pass on my positive experiences to other people.	4.34	.901

Source: Author's.

The respondents were asked to evaluate the relevance of key elements of gastronomic events in the Republic of Serbia. As the most important elements, they marked the elements related to the quality of engaged staff (M=4.64), the quality of food, which is sold at gastronomic events (M=4.61), the variety and organization of the event program (M=4.54), and the taste and variety of food (M=4.51). As for the previous question, respondents mostly identified the most important elements as those that are directly related to the concept of the event. On the other hand, the least important elements were marked the elements in relation to the amount of money spent by visitors (M=3.77) as well as future visits to gastronomic events (M=3.83).

CONCLUSION

The authors analyzed the motivation and perceptions of domestic visitors to gastronomic events in the Republic of Serbia with the aim of identifying the key motives for visiting events as well as the importance of certain elements of this type of event. In order to contribute to the achievement of the research goal, a survey was conducted on a sample of 110 domestic visitors who attended gastronomic events in Serbia. By analyzing the collected responses, it was determined that the primary factors that influence the decision to visit gastronomic events in the Republic of Serbia are gastronomic specialties, gastronomic offer, venue, and atmosphere. The obtained results of the research are compatible with the results of the studies, which are analyzed in this paper. The key elements of gastronomic events in the Republic of Serbia that domestic visitors consider to be important and affect the quality of food and drink festivals have also been identified, namely: the quality of engaged staff, the quality of food, the variety and organization of the event program, and the taste and variety of food, which is thus in accordance with previous researches, which were analyzed in the paper. With this research, the authors highlighted the importance of organizing gastronomic events in Serbia as a way of presenting authentic gastronomic heritage, but also the development of tourism in tourist destinations and attracting tourists. In addition, this paper shows the significant interest of researchers in this topic. The study has certain limitations, which relate to a very small number of respondents as well as the interest of potential respondents to participate in the research as well as insufficient information about their experience when it comes to visiting gastronomic events in the Republic of Serbia. Therefore, in the future, this methodology should be applied to a specific gastronomic event in order to test the accuracy of generalized conclusions. One of the guidelines refers to examining the attitudes of foreign visitors to gastronomic events and conducting comparative analyses.

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