
SATISFACTION OF VISITORS WITH FOOD OFFER AT GASTRONOMIC FESTIVALS IN RURAL AREAS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore visitors experience, habits and attributes that have significant impact on their satisfaction with food offer at “Plum Fair” held in Osečina. Collected data were analyzed and interpreted using some basic descriptive statistics techniques as well as non-parametric test such as Spearman’s Rho. The results of the study showed that the majority of visitors come from the surrounding municipalities, motivated by the preservation of traditions and countryside. Purchase of food products was motivated by novelty as well as supporting local producers. Visitors were most satisfied with the taste of food products and least satisfied with their price. It might be noted that the rural gastronomic festivals and products have a great promotional and entrepreneurial potential by offering these products in the local restaurants as well as retail chains, which would positively affect the revitalization of rural area of Western Serbia.

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Introduction

Gastronomy is defined as the scientific discipline that explore the historical development of nutrition, tradition of preparing and presenting the food of particular regions (Vukić, 2008). In order to preserve the identity of one’s own nation, it is necessary to know the gastronomic history as well as eating habits of its people. On the other hand, knowing

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the eating habits of other nations and exchange of experiences with them is an important prerequisite for keeping up with global culinary trends. The importance of gastronomy as the main component of the tourist product, can be seen especially in the fact that many users find it a leading motive when discovering new destinations. Gastronomic tourism could represent an added value to general experience of the existing tourist offer (Sims, 2009), so it becomes a significant market niche that promotes economic and social development in urban and rural areas (Yun et al., 2011). Gastronomy can also be a new attraction by itself (Szivás, 1999), as well as the primary motive that meets a multitude of tourists' needs and desires. Gastronomic festivals are events that involve the whole local community in promoting local food (Everett, Aitchison 2007). They are also a place of social and cultural cohesion between communities, which brings in direct contact locals, visitors and organizers, encouraging the creatives and using specific local resources (Jamieson, 2014; Kwiatkowska et al., 2019). Entrepreneurial potential of this events should be specially emphasized, because they can be start-ups for co-branding, testing new business ideas, co-creation and strengthening tourism operators' marketing (Dimitrovski, 2016; Hjalager, Kwiatkowski, 2018). Today's gastronomic festivals focused not only on delicious food, but also on delightful entertainment (Wu et al., 2014), and that why they are liminal areas in which the transformation of social space gives way to non-traditional behavior (Picard, Robinson, 2006).

When it comes to gastronomic festivals in rural area, one of the main obstacles is the lack of mapping of rural zones with specific specialties, as well as insufficient information and signalization. With clear promotion strategy tourist operators would have a better insight into the festival's offer (Grigorova et al., 2016). Despite the great potential of rural tourism, special emphasis has to be placed on ecology and sustainable development (Milićević et al., 2020).

The aim of this paper is to explore visitor's satisfaction with food offer at rural gastronomic festivals, as well as their experiences and habits. Based on the results of an empirical research of "Plum Fair" in Osečina, purpose is also to point out the potential of this type of festivals in the wider tourism market.

Theoretical background

In the last ten years, the number of researches of the food festival in rural areas has increased considerably, however, in literature are still dominating the publications of the food festival in the cities (Clark, Rice, 2019). The main focus of these researches is sustainability and revitalization of rural areas (Morgan, 2015; Black, 2016; Rinaldi, 2017; Wilson et al., 2017; Cong et al., 2019;), impact on destination branding (Lee, Arcodia, 2011; Vukic et al. 2012; Blichfeldt, Halkier, 2014; Clark et al., 2019), impact on the local community (Alves et al., 2010; Smith, 2012; Nwokori, 2015; Ducros, 2018) as well as the motives and profile of visitors (Renting et al., 2003; Çela et al. 2007; Sidali et al., 2015; Eusébio et al., 2017; Kwiatkowska et al., 2019). However, very few of the works dealt with the satisfaction of visitors with the gastronomic offer festival in rural areas (Wan, Chan, 2013; Bruwer, 2014; Jung et al, 2015; Markovic at al., 2015; Sohn et al., 2016; Lee at al., 2019).

Gastronomic festivals in rural areas are usually small-scale events which aim is to have a presentation of characteristic local products such as different types of dishes, drinks, fruits and vegetables or varies kind of contests (Mogan, 2015; Krajičková, Shauer, 2018). Visitors to these festivals are often ready to pay a higher price for unique specialties and experience (Renting et al., 2003), which often can be extended thanks to the consumption of these products at home (Sidali et al., 2015). Consumers' profile of these visitors is connected with higher education and belonging to medium-high class (Čela et al., 2007). As motives of visit, it has been specified desire to connect with the nature, environmental protection, search for authentic taste, support to the local producers (Sidali et al., 2015), but often as a dominant motive, it also extracts the desire for socializing (Eusébio et al., 2017; Kwiatkowska et al., 2019). They can have a significant role in finding a solution to stop the weakening of the country's economic power and depopulation (Vukic et al., 2016). Food in terms of its diversity, quality and the price, was a decisive factor of visitors' satisfaction of many other kinds of festivals (Anil, 2012). The most often factors of satisfaction with rural food festivals were: attribute related to food, food uniqueness, staff quality, adequacy of information and facilities, programs, entertainment, creativity, hygiene (Vukić, 2015; Jung et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2019)

Not so few works dealt with the connection of gastronomies and rural areas in Serbia (Stojanović, 2013; Duvnjak et al., 2014; Vukić, 2015; Bjelja et al., 2016; Vujko et al., 2017; Cvijanovic, Ružić, 2017; Stanisic et al., 2018) however, according to the author's knowledge the subject none of those works was satisfaction of a visitor to gastronomic offer at the festivals in rural areas of Serbia. Using cluster analysis author Vukić (2015) revealed four segments of visitors in Serbia: "Rural gastronomies", "Gastronomic aesthetics", „Tasters", and „Gastronomic adventurers ". Although the "rural gastronomies was at least" the most important attributes when choosing the Festival were to be held in the rural environment and to offer local specialties. In the third place, was the duration of the festival tradition, while they were at least interested in the food presentation and entertainment. The largest number of gastronomic events in Serbia is organized at that time of year when the country attendance is the highest, but also that these events are not in the regions with the largest tourist traffic, so that we cannot link the number of tourist visits with the organizing of these festivals (Stanisic et al., 2018). The importance of food festivals is most reflected in the unadopted interaction agricultural producers and tourists, as well as market placement of national gastro products, providing spreading of positive image of Serbia as the destination of gastronomic tourism (Cvijanovic, Ružić, 2017; Vujko et al., 2017).

Gastronomic manifestation in rural areas of Serbia

In Tourism Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, events and festival are recognized as power means for destination branding (Novaković, Mandarić, 2019). Organizing different types manifestations can be adequate marketing strategy for overcoming seasonal character of tourist demand in rural areas (Grubor et al., 2019). The oldest

tourist events in Serbia were dedicated to fruits and vegetables, and starting from the 1990s, the 20th century of this event is becoming more and more present (Bjeljac, 2006). On the territory of the Republic of Serbia, according to the event calendar, it is planned to be maintained 949 events of different categories and content in 2019 (National Tourism Organization of Serbia, 2019). Of the specified number, 369 are theatre manifestations, 3 of the general type, 111 is among the national creativity, 100 are gastronomic, congresses and fairs are 112, economic is 87, sports 138, while holidays' is 39. From here, we can conclude that by the total number of manifestations, the events which as main aim have promoting of gastronomic product are on the third place. However, to those numbers of events surely can be added a certain number of manifestations that are presented in other categories, where visitors are offered promotions of gastronomic products.

The event, which as subject has plum and products of plums, is in very small numbers having in mind that Serbia is ranked fourth in the world, with a production of 400 000t annually. In the Republic of Serbia, Plum is grown at 40% of total orchard area, while the region of Šumadija and western Serbia has the highest participation in production with 62.22% of total production (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018). Events that are being held in our country and are dedicated to the plum are only three: "The days of plum" in Blace, held from 22th August until 25th, "Plum Fair" in Osečina from 30th August to 1st September and „Fair of schnapps“ from 28th September until 29th in Šljivovica (National Tourism Organization of Serbia, 2019). According to this information, it is possible to conclude that plum is fruits that in Serbia have a long tradition of breeding, but to promote this fruit and gastronomic products to its processing, it almost does not exist. That the patterns and gastronomic products of it may be a brand that will promote Serbia in the world, according to the fact that schnapps is registered on the list of the non-materialized cultural heritage of Serbia in October 2015 (Ministry of culture and information republic of Serbia, 2019).

When we are talking about rural manifestations in Serbia it is necessary to first define the term of the rural area. We can safely say that there is no a unique definition of this term. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2018) distinguish rural regions close to cities from remote rural regions. As general criteria of rurality this organization states: dominant in agricultural surface, agriculture as base activities, weak population and low income. In Serbia, the Republican Institute of Statistics implements dichotomous division based on administrative and legal criteria, where urban and "other" settlements differ. Settlements that have a general urban plan are classified in urban, while other automatically are rural (www.stat.gov.rs, 2018). The municipality of Osečina with all surrounding municipalities can be considered as rural and according to the criteria of the OECD, but also the statistical Office of Serbia, because agriculture has over 66% of the territory, while 70% of the population deals with some other type of agricultural production. The production of plums, raspberries and blackberry are most present. There are about 800,000 plum trees in the municipality, which is a capacity of about 16 000 tons (Municipality of Osečina, 2019). Recently, our country has adopted

a number of economic policy measures, in order to stimulate agricultural production, such as subsidizing production, stimulating interest rates, writing off part of the debt to agricultural enterprises, reducing taxes (Pjanić et al., 2018) which can more increase production throughout Serbia as well as Western Serbia.

Materials and methods

In order to explore the experience and satisfaction of visitors to the food festival in rural area, study of local festival “Plum Fair” in Osečina was conducted. The municipality of Osečina is located in Western Serbia and consists of 20 settlements and 18 villages. The municipal seat is a village of Osečina which is 130 km away from Belgrade (Municipality of Osečina, 2019).

“Plum Fair” is an annual festival which has been held since 2006. And aims to affirm all resources that the municipality has. This manifestation was chosen because it is one of the few in the region of western Serbia and Šumadija that promotes the autochthon Serbian fruit varieties, as is the gastronomic products originating from it and are specific for the region.

The survey was conducted in August 2019 on the sample of 106 respondents. The general rule to calculate the sample size is to have a minimum of 5 observations per variable and maximum 10 observations per variable (Hair et al. 2014, Van Belle, 2011). In this study we have 11 variables, so we can consider sample size statistically significant. One part of the data was collected on the spot during the three days of the event, from August 30th to September 1st, while the second part was collected by the link of the survey through social networks to friends and friends of friends who have visited this event. The questionnaire specially created for this research, contained 3 sets of questions: demographic, tenth questions related to visitors’ experience and habits, as well as four statements regarding visitors’ satisfaction with food product. Visitors evaluated statements on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 stands for “Strongly Disagree”, while 5 stands for “Strongly Agree”. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to describe respondents’ demographic characteristics and to evaluate visitors’ satisfaction, experience and habits. Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient is used to examine correlation between satisfaction and visitors’ habits, because Shapiro Wilk test of normality showed that the distribution of each variables is significantly different from normal.

Results

Demographic characteristics of visitors suggest that the number of female respondents is more than male. The largest number of respondents had graduated high school (45.3%), while among them was equal number of employees (44.34%) and unemployed (42.45%). More than half of the visitors were over 36 years old. More detailed demographic information is in table 1.

Table 1. Demographic structure of respondents

Category	Variable	No. of respondent	%
Gender	Male	45	42.5
	Female	61	57.5
Age	Under 18	19	17.9
	From 18 to 25	25	23.6
	From 26 to 35	11	10.4
	From 36 to 45	25	23.6
	From 46 to 60	14	13.2
	More than 60	12	11.3
Education	Primary school	6	5.7
	High school	48	45.3
	College	16	15.1
	Faculty	25	23.6
	Master	11	10.4
	Phd	/	/
Employee status	Employed	47	44.3
	Unemployed	45	42.5
	Retired	14	13.2

Source: Authors' calculations

Analysis of visitors' experience and habits

By analysis of the experience and habits of the visitors of the "Plum Fair" it was determined that the largest number of visitors have been informed about this manifestation through acquaintances (49.1%) and social networks (23.6), while drastically less informed through other means (9.4%), television commercials (8.5%), flyers (6.6%) and printed media (2.8%). Since the largest number of visitors (75.5%) were up to 45 years of age, it is logical that social networks were the basic source of information.

Visitors to this event came, in largest number, with friends (32.1%) or family (31.1%), then in the company of partners (13.2%) and alone (12.3%), and minority of them stated that they came with colleagues (3.8%) and through organized tourism (2.8%). The 4.7% stated as answer - the rest. A shared experience in gastronomic manifestations is exactly what makes them special. They can make a sense of togetherness, closeness that is increasingly losing in modern lifestyle. Offer of additional benefits such as entertainment, prize games, or themed lectures that are not primary when visiting gastronomic festivals, can increase the total created value of visitors that in this way satisfy their needs for socialization. It is needed a greater engagement of travel agencies that would include such events in their program, but also the tourism organizations that would invest more in the promotion of such events.

The largest number of visitors comes from Serbia (82.1%) of which 70.1% are from places that are up to 50 km. From the territory of the former Socialist Federal Republic

of Yugoslavia comes 13.2%, while only 4.7% came from the diaspora. As the event is attended predominantly by domicile population, this event has local character. However, by linking this event to other tourism, such as rural, religious, spa or mountain it is possible to attract visitors from other parts of Serbia or the region, thus boosting the duration of stay in destination.

Regarding the frequency of the visit, half of the respondents (57.5%) only once a year visit such events, 27.4% of respondents visit two to four times a year and only 15% visit more than 5 times. As the main motives of visits, the respondents stated the preservation of traditions (28.3%), love of nature (18.9%) and the atmosphere (17%), a slightly smaller percentage as reasons stated socializing (13.2%), while an equal number of visitors, i.e., 7.5% stated free tasting, curiosity and professional reasons as the main motive for the visit. It is interesting that research in the motives of visitors as a dominant motive has been extracted by the desire for socialization (Pesenos, 2015, Eusébio et al., 2017; Kwiatkowska et al., 2019) while here is only in fourth place.

When visiting the most important attributes of the event are prices (42.5%), product quality (44.3%), while they are very little important to the aesthetics of products (2.8%), exhibitor's hygiene (1.9%), attendance (0.9%) as well as availability of products only during the event (Unique Offer) (0.9%). They 6.6% of them cited other reasons. Such a small interest in the attributes of the unique offer can be connected with the visitors of this event mainly to the local that these products are easily available to. Since the highest number of visitors has purchased one of the gastronomic products (68.9%) and 18.9% have declared that it is intended, we can conclude that this fair has a strong economic impact whether it is a direct and indirect expenditure of the participants. Only 12.3% of them did not buy anything. Also, the number of visitors said the offer of free tasting products was enough (49.1%), even extremely rich (34.9%), while 16% were not satisfied. The main reasons for the purchase of gastronomic products were the desire to try something (32.1%), support to local producers (20.8%), impulsive purchase (16%), professional reasons (3.8%), desire to buy product as souvenir (13.2%) and to conserve for more favorable prices (14.2%).

Visitors' satisfaction with food offer and correlation with their habits

Apart from the habits of visitors of the event "Plum fair" in this paper, it has been analyzed their satisfaction with certain attributes of the exposed food products (Table 2). By observing the arithmetic mean of individual items of satisfaction factor, it can be noted that visitors are most satisfied with the taste of gastronomic products (means = 4.528) and at least their price (means = 4.198). The descriptive data for each feature of the gastronomic offer is in the Table 2.

Table 2. Structural view of summary satisfaction scale of gastronomic offer

Assess your satisfaction with the following attributes of the exhibited gastronomic offer from 1 to 5	means	St.dev	min	max
Diversity	4.4151	0.741529	1	5
Aesthetics	4.4623	0.758125	1	5
Taste	4.5283	0.807200	1	5
Price	4.1981	0.960355	1	5

Source: Authors' calculations

In addition to the satisfaction of certain features of the product, it is also calculated summed satisfaction of the gastronomic offer which is the sum of the scores on the questions attached in the table 2 and then divided with the number of questions. Central tendency measures, such as arithmetic mean and standard deviation, the summary scale of satisfaction said that respondents on average are satisfied with the offered products (means = 4.4), and that the responses of the respondents are not different from each other (Std. Deviation = 0.70768). In order to calculate the reliability of the created scale of satisfaction, the Chronbach Alpha reliability test was used, which equals 0.884, which showed that the data obtained in this survey may be considered as reliable.

Because the value of Chronbach Alpha, in case when each of the individual items would be thrown out, is less than Chronbach Alpha for the whole scale (table 3), the decision is to retain each of the item when creating the new satisfaction scale. Also, from the table can be seen how much each of the item contributes to explaining the summed satisfaction, where the diversity is most contributing to explaining satisfaction, since its value Corrected Item-Total Correlation the largest, i.e., it can be concluded that 67% of total satisfaction is explained only by the attributes of diversity, which shows the coefficient of determination which is obtained by squaring of the correlation coefficient.

Table 3. Structural view of summary satisfaction scale of gastronomic offer

Indicators	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Diversity	13.1887	4.802	0.819	0.829
Aesthetics	13.1415	4.999	0.720	0.863
Taste	13.0755	4.699	0.761	0.847
Price	13.4057	4.224	0.726	0.869

Source: Authors' calculations

In order to examine the connectivity of satisfaction with visitors' habits, such as the distance from which they come, the frequency of visits, the offer of free products and the habit of purchasing, the correlation analysis was performed (table 4). For this purpose, Spearman's rho was used having in mind that Shapiro Wilk test of normality showed that the distribution of the above variables is significantly different from normal ($p < 0.05$).

Table 4. Spearman's rho

		Purchased product	Frequency	Satisfaction
Distance	Correlation Coefficient	0.272	0.365	-0.90
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.005	0.000	0.361
Free tasting offer	Correlation Coefficient	0.167	0.227	0.338
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.087	0.019	0.000
Purchased product	Correlation Coefficient	1.00	0.313	0.049
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.001	0.620

Source: Authors' calculations

The results of the correlation analysis showed that there is a linear connection between the distances from which the visitors are coming and the frequency of the visit (0365; $p < 0.01$), distance and purchase of products (0272; $p < 0.05$), frequency of the visit and offers of free products (0227; $p < 0.05$), frequency of visit and purchase of the product (0313; $p < 0.01$), and between satisfaction of offer and offer of free products (0338; $p < 0.01$).

Also, based on the correlation results, the total satisfaction is not dependent on a gender, education, age or employment status of respondents, to what the value of Spearman's Rho ($P > 0.05$) refers to.

Conclusions

Rural food products, as a part of national gastronomy, traditions and customs, represents a mirror of the material culture of one nation. Although gastronomic manifestations constitute only one tenth of the total number of events in Serbia, we are witnessing that this number has a trend of increasing. Rural areas of Western Serbia and Šumadija together with their natural and anthropogenic and ecological values can have a significant role in attracting tourists who search for authentic experiences and products. "Plum Fair" in Osečina is mainly visited by local visitors, so it is very important that the organizers pay more attention to the promotion of this festival in the other regions of Serbia or nearby countries. Better knowing the main motives, which were in this case preservation of tradition and nature, can help in creating additional content such as workshops about local herbal species, healthy eating habits, hiking, competitions or organize meals with locals in their home.

Such an event, can have a significant economic impact on all stakeholders, especially because of the high sale rate of food product. Since taste was the attribute with the highest score these products can be offered in local restaurants and hotels. With adequate branding strategy it is possible to increase the visibility of these products on the wider market by selling them in chains of hypermarkets, department stores and grocery stores. This idea derives from results of this study which showed that visitors who come from remote areas purchase more often than the other ones.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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