

Economics of agriculture

SI – 2

UDK: 338.48-6:641/642 (497.11)

TRADITIONAL FOOD AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN SERBIA

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Abstract

Analysis is based on qualitative research. Two focus groups were conducted. Paper examines differences between urban and rural participants' perception and image of traditional food and possible implications for rural tourism development. Analysis confirms positive image of traditional food both in rural and urban group. However, regarding perceptions several differences appear (in terms of variety, availability, home made or processed, quality control system and labeling). Authors argue that level of utilization of these concepts in further development of rural tourism will to a large extent depend on perceptions and image of final users of rural tourism services (urban population).

Key words: *Traditional Food, Concepts, Image, Perceptions, Rural Tourism.*

Introduction

Exploring the linkages between agriculture, traditional food and rural tourism development

Agriculture plays a special role in the concept of sustainable rural development and it is observed as traditionally the most present activity of rural economy. Natural, human, manufactured, financial and local resources are all engaged in creation of rural economy. By means of politics, procedures and institutions, these resources are transformed not only into food as a visible product, but also into employment, welfare

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of local community, clean air and healthy environment (*Kahn, 1998*).

The initial phase of rural development is often seen as the agricultural based. It means that only directly linked activities with agricultural production can be considered as factors of the local rural community development, such as rural tourism (*Torres, Momsen, 2004; Knowd, 2006*). However, rural tourism is currently not yet sufficiently structured and organized in Serbia (*Strategy of Tourism Development, 2006*). If one bears in mind the specific position of underdeveloped rural economy, then it is definitely necessary to investigate the perspectives for further valorisation of traditional food as an integral part of the offer that can create added value for rural regions. Furthermore, understanding the consumers' image and perception towards food products that are traditional and typical of a certain region can provide useful insights on further sector development. Exploring the ways in which consumers perceive and value traditional food usually draws upon results of exploratory qualitative research - consumers' understanding traditional food to be a complex dynamic of interrelated concepts (*Skuras, Dimara, Petrou, 2006*).

Traditional food is generally related to very long history, local culture and eating habits learnt from the past (transmitting knowledge from generation to generation). However, the quantity of traditional food available at the market heavily depends on the size of production area and efficiency of short distribution channels (*Alkon, 2008*). Local availability of the given product is a key element for its supply. Traditional food is mainly defined by human-related factors (*Barham, 2003; Dixon, 1999*). Contemporary understanding of traditional food in Europe is also referred to the concept of typical food of the region. Consequently, the concept of regional food is strongly related to the Geographical Indication labeling policy (*Giraud, 2008*). However, export of traditional foods are deemed to be scarce. There is some evidence that export of traditional foods is provoked only by immigrants' communities (*Verbeke, Lopez, 2005*). It seems that traditional food is more local or interregional oriented. It can be concluded that increasing of demand for traditional food (and agricultural production as well) can be provoked by integrated approach to rural tourism development.

Method and research questions

Analysis presented in this paper is exploratory in nature. To determine the perceptions and image of traditional food in Serbia qualitative research method was implemented. The research is based on the focus-group discussions (FGD) conducted in urban and rural region in Serbia.⁴ The first FGD was held in capital city – Belgrade with urban population, and the second in South-East Serbia – Zajecar with rural participants. Total of 18 participants were interviewed (10 and 8 respectively). Participants were selected by chance through screening procedure, using recruitment questionnaire.

⁴ The research is implemented in the frame of FP7 Focus Balkans - Grant Agreement no.212579. The study was also related to the implementation of the Project 149 007 - MSTD of Serbia.

Respondents were responsible for food shopping selected so as to vary in age and gender.

What the paper seeks to analyze in particular are rural-urban differences in respondents' image and perception of traditional food in Serbia. The analysis refers following research questions: (1) What are urban and rural respondents perceptions of traditional food? How is the traditional food concept understood in Serbia? Are there any differences between urban and rural participants perception of traditional food? (2) What is the image of traditional food in Serbia? Are there any differences between urban and rural participants regarding this issue? (3) How is traditional food concept supportive to the rural tourism development in Serbia? Can the image of traditional food be converted into qualitative tourist offer? Are there any indications among urban population that can support overall rural economy development by traditional food consumption and rural tourism development?

Findings and discussion

Perception of traditional food

Understanding perceptions of traditional food firstly addressed what types of products/dishes our respondents considered traditional. Therefore, participants were firstly asked to list five food items they perceived traditional (non-aided cognitive responses). Their spontaneous evocation of traditional food mostly included typical dishes and food products frequently consumed at their homes such are: *beans, sarma, cabbage, green beans, peas and potato, diary products such are cheese and kajmak, pies and cheese pies as well as corn flower made dishes (kacamak and proja)*.

Overall, the differences among our respondents as well as between the two focus groups were hard to notice concerning this issue since all the above listed traditional dishes and products were mentioned in both focus groups. However, particular dishes were more frequently mentioned by the respondents in those focus groups (eg. beans in rural and sarma in urban). Another interesting point is that *ajvar* (traditional Serbian dish) and *belmuz* (typical for the region where the rural focus group was held) were not frequently mentioned.

According to their discussion on the products they were asked to list as traditional while providing the explanation for their choice of typical traditional products in Serbia we were able to recognize several different concepts of traditional food, namely: 1) traditional food as home-made (hand-made) food, opposite to industrial products/dishes, 2) traditional food as food prepared and consumed by many different generations 3) traditional food as locally produced/grown food 4) traditional food as food exclusively produced and consumed in Serbia 5) traditional food as food evocating emotions – food made in our childhood, food made in villages by our grandparents, food consumed in a family and food connected with social events. While all the five concepts may be found based on our respondents' discussions in both focus groups, most of participants in the rural focus group seem to have been particularly stressing traditional food as healthy

food due to its controlled natural ingredients and no additives and preservatives. The typical statements are listed below:

“I have regarded traditional as something domestic (i.e. home-made), without additives, e.g. Zlatibor cheese. And mild cheese as well however rather that bought at a green market not packed like this one.” (Female, urban); *“I selected kajmak, cvarci and slatko since they are usually home-made, not imported and I consider those a healthy food. Industrial products may also be made in Serbia, however I don’t see them traditional, and I rather consider natural products to be traditional.”* (Female, rural)

Our respondents mostly associated traditional food with *village, family, and heritage, frequency of consumption, home-made food, tasty food and healthy food*. The following statements support all these concepts:

“Present and produced in villages – kajmak, kacamak, beans.” (Male, urban); *“It is my mother’s cuisine.”* (Female, urban); *“It has always been on the table – for example cheese.”* (Male, rural); *“Our production – home made. It is more tasty when home made.”* (Female, rural)

Positive perceptions of traditional food are mostly as follows: natural, not genetically modified and therefore healthier food that also tasted much better than any other kind of food. Our participants in the rural focus group have particularly stressed the concept of healthy food related to traditional food. It is perceived positive since it is made of natural ingredients, home-made and controlled since obtained from own fields of reliable farmers, not containing additives and preservatives.

“The main quality is taste. It is the tastiest food.” (Female, urban) *“It is with many colors – colorful.”*(Male, urban); *Our Serbian traditional food is well-known. All those who come to visit us are amazed with it. It tastes different, it is tastier.”* (Female, rural); *“A home-made food doesn’t contain seasonings and preservatives. It is healthier.”* (Male, rural)

On the other hand, in both focus groups healthiness has also been seen as the most negative aspect of traditional food which is also considered to be unhealthy due to its fatness, high caloric values and low diversity of ingredients, especially healthy nutrients.

Image of traditional food

Regarding the image of the traditional food certain differences among our respondents as well as between the two focus groups were noted. Both urban and rural participants consider traditional food healthy or at least healthier than other industrially produced food. For rural participants the image of traditional food is homemade, domestically prepared/produced food. However, for the urban group the image is food without pesticides, additives and artificial components.

The most common association of health dimension of the traditional food for the rural participants is related to its diversity - the wide variety of traditional products and dishes produced and offered at the market. However, all respondents consider Serbian traditional food overwhelmed with meat, full of fat, prepared as grilled, roasted or fried. The latter was particularly emphasized female participants. Also younger participants consider traditional food not to be particularly healthy.

“The best indication that the traditional food is healthy is that people in rural areas are healthier than people in the cities. For the healthy diet it is equally important adequate physical activity. Very often we can see that old people in villages eat cheese, polenta, corn bread, beans and drink one glass of rakija and they are long-lived. The rural population used to come to town in our past, and now they are returning to the countryside.” (Male, rural)

As a part of its image among rural participants particularly, traditional food is considered to be more natural than other types of food. However, they argue that some ingredients (chemicals) are the inevitable part of the agricultural production process. The products produced out of season (e.g. in greenhouses) are considered full of chemicals and not natural, and consequently, not so healthy.

“Some products are natural. All products collected in nature - wild apple, blueberry, etc. We make jam from them and so on. They are completely natural. Villages in the mountain area focused on the natural pastures have natural cheese, cream and milk.” (Male, rural); “There is no natural food; nothing else left that might be clarified as completely natural. But it is more natural than other foods certainly.” (Male, urban)

The rural participants also consider the traditional products/dishes as high quality food. For the urban participants quality equals trust both to the product origin and producer. Both urban and rural participants argued among themselves that traditional home-made was of a better quality than industrially prepared. The discussion among urban participants lead to a conclusion that the price might best serve as an indicator of the quality of the traditional food – higher price indicates higher quality of products available at market.

“Yes, they are high quality products. We are from the village. When preparing for yourself and your family or friends, it must be delicious.” (Male, rural); “It is a geographical area; I have more faith in the products that are from a particular region.” (Male, urban); Compared to the industrially produced products they are extremely of high quality - it also may depend on location of the production and environment and so on.” (Male, rural); “Yes they are, but only when they come from domestic, personal production.” (Female, urban)

Both rural and urban participants agree that in each country it is well known which region produces the best quality food. In that context the origin of traditional products is considered as an important characteristic. The rural participants perception of the traditional food is more locally oriented opposite to the people in the urban -

capital city, who had the idea only about the traditional products available at the market (both green markets and supermarkets). During the discussion the rural participants insisted on legal protection of Serbian traditional products in order to avoid their protection by the other countries in the region as their own.

Conclusions and recommendations for further research

Perception and image of the traditional food discussed in this paper suggest rather high impact of these products on rural tourism and local economy development. However, level of utilization of traditional food will to a large extent depend on the perception and image of these products particularly among urban population. Based on the qualitative study, we may derive several tentative conclusions on the implications of traditional food image and perception on overall rural development and in particular rural tourism development.

The perception of traditional food is related to several different concepts, all of which may make a sound basis for developing promotional strategy of rural tourism among the local population in Serbia. Associations to traditional food such are *village*, *family and heritage* as well as *home-made food* evoke positive emotions which could also be conceptualized for the purposes of rural tourism promotion. On the other hand, associations such are *tasty food* and *healthy food* are primarily connected with positive perceptions of traditional food among our respondents.

Regarding image of the traditional food, our general finding is that the participants consider it healthier than other kinds of food. However, two concepts of healthiness have been distinguished, i.e. natural (not artificial, without preservatives) and tasty and fatty food. There seem not to be any significant differences regarding the natural character of traditional since this was particularly stressed in both rural and urban FGD. Additionally, rural participants perceive taste as an important element of the traditional food quality. However, regarding other part of the as healthy food related to the patterns of consumption and its high caloric value. In that sense, women seem to be particularly skeptical about the health benefits of traditional food than man.

The rural participants knowledge on the traditional food is more locally oriented opposite to the people in the urban - capital city, who had the idea only about the traditional products available on the market (both green/open market and supermarkets). It could also indicate the level of traditional food recognition on the national market. Only products with sufficient supply for the large market segments are recognized. Therefore, local producers should be supported to establish cooperatives to strengthen their market position and promote their food products while simultaneously contributing to the promotion of touristic offer of their regions. In the same way, they should be supported to apply for the label of geographic origin which make highly relevant information as well as a certificate of high quality for both for domestic and foreign consumers. Moreover, the fact that these products can represent the regional tradition not only to Serbian but also foreign tourists could be implemented in the overall strategy of development of rural tourism in Serbia. However, any further discussion

on the usage of traditional food in Serbia as central point of rural tourism promotion directed at foreign tourists calls for a broader research and analysis. In consequence, the findings analyzed here are primarily relevant for utilization of traditional food in rural tourism development and its promotion among prospective Serbian tourists.

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