
Culinary Heritage Routes as a Part of Regional Identity and Original Tourist Product

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Abstract:

Purpose: This paper seeks to explore the role of culinary heritage routes as an integral part of regional tourism development. Specifically, it examines how these routes contribute to the regional identity and serve as a tool for economic diversification.

Design/Methodology/Approach: By reviewing case studies and existing literature, this study aims to illustrate the potential of culinary routes to enhance regional attractiveness and foster sustainable development, ultimately positioning them as a valuable asset within the broader context of cultural tourism.

Findings: Through strategic branding, experiential offerings, and active community involvement, culinary routes have established themselves as valuable tourism products that contribute to regional economic resilience, cultural preservation, and sustainable tourism practices.

Practical Implications: Research has a very strong translation into practical application. With such indications, further interpretive activities can be planned, especially in places that need additional attention, are less well known and face the problem of undertourism.

Originality/Value: The article presents the results of own desk research. The issue presented has not previously been addressed in discussions published internationally.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, tourism has undergone significant diversification, moving beyond traditional attractions toward more specialized and experience-driven forms. One notable trend within this shift is culinary tourism, where food, cuisine, and culinary traditions become central elements of the travel experience (Richards, 2002; Hjalager and Richards, 2003).

Culinary tourism emphasizes local food culture, offering tourists a unique opportunity to engage with a destination's heritage through its flavors, techniques, and gastronomic practices. Within this context, culinary heritage routes have emerged as a compelling way to connect travelers to a region's culinary traditions and have been increasingly recognized as valuable components of regional tourism products (Hashimoto and Telfer, 2006; Long, 2004). These routes, often designed around specific local dishes, ingredients, or cultural practices, create immersive experiences that attract culinary enthusiasts while promoting local economic development.

The concept of culinary heritage routes aligns closely with the idea of cultural tourism, which seeks to preserve and promote the intangible aspects of a destination's culture (UNESCO, 2003). As studies have shown, culinary heritage routes serve not only as a means to celebrate local gastronomy but also play a critical role in preserving and revitalizing cultural heritage, supporting local food systems, and encouraging sustainable tourism practices (Mason and Paggiaro, 2012; Sims, 2009).

This dual role, contributing to both tourism development and cultural conservation, makes culinary routes valuable assets for regional destinations seeking to differentiate themselves in a competitive tourism market (Everett, 2016). Furthermore, by fostering interactions between tourists and local producers, culinary routes contribute to an understanding of local culture that extends beyond the superficial and into authentic, experience-based learning (Bessiere, 1998; Everett and Aitchison, 2008).

2. The Role of Culinary Heritage in Regional Identity – Literature Review

Culinary heritage routes can thus be seen as a strategic part of a region's tourism product, offering both economic and cultural benefits. Through carefully planned routes that highlight local food and culinary practices, regions can draw attention to distinctive agricultural products, traditional recipes, and historical culinary practices (Du Rand and Heath, 2006). Such initiatives encourage tourists to explore rural areas, participate in food-related events, and support small-scale local businesses, thereby creating a more sustainable tourism model that benefits both the community and the environment (Timothy and Ron, 2013).

Culinary heritage plays a crucial role in defining and reinforcing regional identity, as food is often an expression of cultural values, historical practices, and local resources. Culinary traditions are not merely about sustenance; they embody the heritage of communities, reflecting the region's history, environment, and social structure (Bessiere, 1998). For many regions, food has become a key marker of identity, attracting both local pride and external interest. Integrating culinary heritage into tourism, therefore, allows regions to showcase their uniqueness and promote cultural preservation, creating meaningful, immersive experiences for tourists (Everett and Aitchison, 2008).

Culinary heritage is an integral part of regional identity, encapsulating a community's history, traditions, and environmental resources. The food traditions of a region provide insight into its cultural values, social practices, and historical context, and thus serve as a powerful tool for fostering regional identity (Bessiere, 1998). Food is both a tangible and intangible expression of a region's unique culture, encompassing not only specific dishes but also the customs, techniques, and rituals associated with their preparation and consumption (Timothy and Ron, 2013).

For many regions, preserving and promoting culinary heritage through tourism has become a central strategy for reinforcing identity, preserving tradition, and fostering economic development. One of the primary ways of culinary heritage reinforces regional identity is by providing communities with a tangible link to their past.

Traditional dishes and foodways act as symbols of shared history, representing the social, agricultural, and economic conditions that shaped a community's evolution. In regions such as Provence in France, food reflects the Mediterranean agricultural heritage and influences of olive oil, wine, and herbs, providing a direct connection to the land and climate (Montanari, 2006).

The region's culinary identity is rooted in its landscape and climate, where local olive groves, vineyards, and lavender fields shape not only the food but also the culture of Provence. This connection is central to the sense of place and belonging for the people of Provence, who take pride in the distinctiveness of their local products.

In Italy, the concept of *terroir*, which encompasses the unique environmental conditions and traditional methods used in food production, further underscores the importance of culinary heritage in regional identity. Each region in Italy has its own culinary specialities that reflect local resources, from Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese in Emilia-Romagna to Chianti wine in Tuscany.

These products are more than just foods – they are symbols of regional pride and heritage, protected by Designation of Origin laws to ensure their authenticity and preservation. These laws not only safeguard the quality of the product but also the

cultural practices associated with its production, thereby reinforcing regional identity (Sims, 2009).

Table 1. Case Studies of Culinary Heritage Routes as a Regional Identity Marker

No.	Location (region/country)	Culinary activity in regional tourism space development – description	Culinary tourism product (examples)
1.	Basque Country / Spain	The Basque Country in northern Spain is internationally recognized for its culinary heritage, which is central to the region's cultural identity. Basque cuisine emphasizes local ingredients, traditional cooking techniques, and small, locally owned establishments such as <i>pintxo</i> bars. The Basque Culinary Center, a pioneering institution in gastronomic education, was established in San Sebastián to preserve and promote Basque culinary traditions (Medina & Tresserras, 2008). By investing in culinary education and establishing gastronomic tourism routes focused on traditional <i>pintxos</i> and Basque cider, the Basque Country has successfully positioned its culinary heritage as a central feature of its regional identity. These initiatives not only attract tourists but also foster pride among local residents in their unique cultural traditions.	- Pintxos Route in San Sebastián This route is famous for creative and delicious bites featuring local ingredients like anchovies, peppers, and cured meats. - Cheese and Cider Route in Idiazabal and Astigarraga Known for its Idiazabal cheese, this route includes visits to cheese makers in the Idiazabal area and cider houses in Astigarraga, where guests can enjoy cider straight from the barrel alongside Basque specialties
2.	Tuscany / Italy	Tuscany's culinary identity is closely tied to its agricultural heritage and regional terroir. The region is famed for products such as Chianti wine, olive oil, and cured meats, all of which are deeply embedded in Tuscan culture. Culinary heritage in Tuscany is not only a source of economic value but also an expression of local identity and pride. Food-related tourism initiatives, including wine routes like the Strada del Vino Chianti, allow visitors to experience Tuscan culture by exploring the vineyards and farms that produce these iconic products (Montanari, 2006). These experiences emphasize the close connection between Tuscan culinary practices and the land, reinforcing regional identity through food.	- Olive Oil Route – olive oil mills around Lucca, where visitors can learn about Tuscan olive oil production and sample fresh oils, often paired with local breads and cured meats;

3.	Quebec / Canada	Quebec's culinary heritage is an expression of its French-Canadian roots and distinct regional culture. Traditional dishes such as tourtière (meat pie) and poutine (fries with cheese curds and gravy) reflect the agricultural and culinary practices brought by French settlers and adapted over centuries. Quebec's government actively supports local products through initiatives like "Aliments du Québec," a certification label for locally produced foods that reinforces Quebec's unique culinary identity (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2006). Additionally, the province's sugar shacks, or cabanes à sucre, which celebrate maple syrup production, have become an important cultural and touristic experience, connecting visitors with Quebec's culinary heritage.	- Cider and Apple Route in the Eastern Townships: known for its orchards and cideries, this route lets visitors sample a variety of apple products, including ice cider, a specialty of Quebec
4.	Istria / Croatia	The Istrian peninsula in Croatia has cultivated a distinct culinary identity that reflects both Mediterranean and Central European influences. The Istrian Olive Oil Route, for example, promotes the region's ancient tradition of olive oil production, which dates back to Roman times. Istrian olive oil is renowned for its quality and is considered a vital part of the region's culinary heritage. This route not only supports local producers but also educates visitors about the historical and cultural significance of olive oil in Istrian life, reinforcing a unique regional identity and attracting gastronomic tourism (Karabatić, 2011).	- Wine Route in Istrian Hilltowns: This route covers vineyards around hilltowns like Motovun and Grožnjan, where travelers can taste indigenous Istrian wines, such as Malvazija and Teran

Source: Own elaboration.

Culinary heritage fosters regional identity by creating economic and social benefits for local communities. Tourism focused on local food and beverages provides a sustainable source of income, supporting small-scale producers and creating job opportunities in rural areas (Sims, 2009). For example, in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy, culinary tourism centered on Parmigiano-Reggiano and balsamic vinegar has provided stability for local farmers and artisans, while also attracting international tourists interested in the authentic Italian food experience.

Additionally, events like harvest festivals and food fairs bring communities together and allow residents to celebrate their traditions, enhancing social cohesion and cultural pride.

Beyond economic benefits, the preservation of culinary heritage supports sustainable development by encouraging environmentally friendly agricultural practices. Traditional food production often aligns with principles of sustainability, emphasizing seasonal ingredients, local sourcing, and minimal processing. In Trentino, Italy, the Strada del Vino e dei Sapori del Trentino route promotes organic wines and biodynamic farming, supporting both the environment and the authenticity of regional products (Timothy and Ron, 2013).

3. Culinary Routes as a Tourism Product

Culinary routes have increasingly emerged as a key element in regional tourism development, conceptualized as distinct tourist products that blend cultural and gastronomic experiences. As a tourist product, a culinary route encompasses a network of gastronomic attractions – including restaurants, food producers, vineyards, and local markets – arranged along a defined path that tourists can follow to explore a region’s culinary heritage (Everett, 2016).

This concept moves beyond single attractions to create a cohesive experience that connects travelers to the cultural identity of a destination through food. In examining culinary routes as tourist products, it is essential to analyze their structure, including their components, branding, and marketing strategies, as well as their impact on local economies and cultural preservation.

A culinary route thus creates a product with a very clear structure, containing the fundamental elements of a classic tourist product. It includes:

Component and Networked Attractions:

These may include local farms, wineries, artisan food producers, restaurants specializing in traditional dishes, and marketplaces that sell regional specialties. For instance, the Polish “Małopolska Wine Route” connects over 30 vineyards in the Małopolska region, promoting local wine production and offering tourists experiences such as vineyard tours, tastings, and events centered around traditional Polish wine-making techniques (Szromek, 2020). This networked structure allows visitors to encounter a range of food-related experiences, reinforcing the regional culinary identity and providing a multifaceted tourist product.

Branding and Thematic Identity:

The culinary route is perceived as branded tourism products, often under a distinctive theme or identity that reflects regional heritage and cultural elements. The “Skåne Food Route” in southern Sweden is a good example from Scandinavia, where the brand emphasizes sustainable, locally sourced ingredients and traditional Scandinavian culinary practices. This route promotes its products with a focus on the natural environment and sustainability, appealing to tourists interested in eco-friendly tourism options (Bjork and Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2014). A strong brand

identity provides culinary routes with a unique position in the tourism market, differentiating them from other regional attractions.

Experimental and Participatory Elements:

Contemporary tourists increasingly seek immersive experiences that offer authentic engagement with local culture (Richards, 2002). Culinary routes cater to this demand by providing interactive elements that allow tourists to participate in the culinary culture of a region. The Czech “Moravian Wine Route,” for example, includes options for visitors to join grape harvests, engage in hands-on workshops about wine production, and enjoy wine-tasting events led by local vintners. This participatory approach enhances the route’s appeal, creating memorable experiences that connect tourists directly with local producers and regional traditions (Zátíková and Jirásek, 2017).

Marketing and Accessibility:

Effective marketing and clear information are essential to the success of culinary routes as tourist products. Digital marketing strategies, informational brochures, and local guides are commonly employed to promote routes and enhance visitor accessibility. The Norwegian “Cider Route” in the Hardangerfjord region uses a combination of online platforms, social media, and partnerships with local tourism organizations to promote its attractions, highlighting seasonal cider festivals and interactive tours. This approach maximizes reach and ensures that potential tourists can easily plan their visits (Olsen, 2013). Additionally, routes are often accessible by public transport or designated paths for cycling and hiking, aligning with sustainable tourism goals.

4. Conclusions

Culinary routes as tourist products provide multiple benefits for regional tourism development. Firstly, they attract a niche market of culinary tourists who seek authentic, experience-rich travel. This demand supports local economies, especially small-scale producers who benefit from the increased exposure and direct sales opportunities that come with route participation.

Secondly, culinary routes strengthen regional identity, as they showcase unique local foods, traditional practices, and cultural stories, fostering pride among local communities and encouraging cultural preservation (Everett and Aitchison, 2008). Lastly, by emphasizing sustainable practices, many culinary routes align with broader goals of responsible tourism, promoting eco-friendly travel options and minimizing environmental impact (Bjork and Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2014).

Through strategic branding, experiential offerings, and active community involvement, culinary routes have established themselves as valuable tourism products that contribute to regional economic resilience, cultural preservation, and sustainable tourism practices. Examples from Central Europe and Scandinavia

illustrate how culinary routes can serve as a successful model for regions looking to enhance their tourism portfolios while preserving and promoting their cultural heritage.

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