

## Rural Food Tourism

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**Abstract:** This article aims to present opportunities for integrated tourist product in rural areas of Bulgaria with an emphasis on traditional Bulgarian dishes. Tradition in culinary production is the primary prerequisite for the development of rural tourism and its derivatives. Regional gastronomy as a tourism resource is a key element in rural tourism performance and can be used as a tool for the development of tourism in the area. The main drivers for rural food tourism are discussed. The PESTLE analysis is used to assess the external factors in relation to rural food tourism situation in Bulgaria. It also helps to identify SWOT factors and give lastly conclusions and recommendations.

**Key words:** rural tourism, food tourism, rural development

### 1. Introduction

The tourism system is dynamic and its interdisciplinary nature requires its continuous research and analysis. The beginning of the new century was marked by changes in supply and demand in the tourism industry. The contemporary phase of tourism development is characterized by a steady increase in tourist travel and the amount of time devoted to recreation and tourism. Factors influencing this process are manifold: increased prosperity in society, increased leisure time, fragmentation of annual holidays, new ways of communication, urbanization and growing population, many aspects of "social life" and personal motivation to take a trip, etc. Until now tourism has been principally driven by just one of the senses - sight - at the expense of the other senses. Tourists are now beginning to react against this strong sensual bias by demanding holidays that stimulate the other senses (Guzman, Canizares, 2012). Further important trend that affects tourism demand is improving the food culture of consumers who are looking for opportunities to improve their lifestyle and health status. This encourages a higher interest in healthy eating habits and leads to greater consumption of healthy foods. Bulgarian cuisine is exceptionally diverse and delicious, consisting of various salads, breadstuffs, stews, and other local dishes. Many of the dishes are prepared according to traditional recipes handed down from generation to generation over the centuries (Tourism portal of Bulgaria). Traditional dishes indicate a direct connection with nature, culture, religion and lifestyle of local communities. In its very essence regional gastronomy is a resource for the development of rural tourism,

diversifies the landscape and generates huge differences in the productive base. Promotion of local and regional production reserves culinary heritage and guarantees fair remuneration for producers. According to a study made by the Agency for Regional Development of Rila 84% of tourists in rural areas, who bought souvenirs, preferred food and drinks to take home. In the strategic plan for the development of cultural tourism of Bulgaria tourist position of the country following strategic actions undertaken in recent years must rely on four competitive factors - history, art and culture, traditions and enogastronomy - valorising its most powerful features. The development of rural areas in Bulgaria is the key issue in many legislative and strategic documents and priorities are set to enhance attractiveness and strengthen development. The opportunities which are provided by agriculture, food industry and tourism make them the sectors with greatest significance in the processes of overcoming rural depopulation through sustainable economic and social development (goods and services according to end-users demand in conditions of sustainable use of resources) (Arabska, et al., 2014).

### **Growing market**

Gastronomy plays a significant role in representing the culture and lifestyle of specific area and reflects new trends in tourism related to authenticity, sustainability, healthy lifestyle and revival of traditions. According to Global report on food tourism (UNWTO, 2012) this leading role of gastronomy in the choice of destination and tourism consumption has resulted in the growth of gastronomic offerings based on high-quality local products and the consolidation of a separate market for food tourism. As identity marker of a

region and/or as a means of promoting farm products, gastronomy meets the specific needs of consumers, local producers and other actors in rural tourism (Bessiere, 1998). On this basis the food tourism is a rapidly growing sector and rural areas can use it as a tool of economic diversification.

In the current global environment the relationship between food and tourism therefore represents a significant opportunity product development as well as a means to rural diversification (Hall, et. al., 2004).

Tourists of the rural food tourism seeking an authenticity of the visited place through the food they consume there. They recognize the value of gastronomy as a means of socializing, as a space for sharing life with others, for exchanging experiences (Global report on food tourism). Even in the daily life, variety and change are necessary complements to the routines and habits. Thus, in tourism, itself a form of change from the daily routine, quest for various foods is one of appealing experiences (Quan, Wang, 2004). The conversion of the territory into a culinary landscape is one of the challenges of tourism destinations (UNWTO, 2012). Destination product portfolios consist of a variety of tangible and intangible goods and services. Food (including beverage) can form one of the most important of these elements (Okumus et al., 2007). It is important to identify existing natural and heritage resource that will become an asset for tourism. Heritage valorization represents not only a fashionable trend but also social, economic and political determination. Indeed, if local authorities are experiencing an identity crisis and are discovering a new-found interest for their own gastronomy, heritage promotion may turn out to be profitable. As tourists come into their area, they buy local products or eat in restaurants or on farms, thus representing a sizeable source of income for local communities (Bessiere, 1998). Sims (2010) stated that local food can have an important role to play in sustainable tourism as a result of its ability to satisfy a complex range of demands – from producer concerns about the importance of reducing food miles and promoting animal welfare to tourists' demands for iconic products that appear to say something about a region's place and culture.

Hall et al. (2003) described the relationship between food and tourism for the purpose of place competitiveness in the following scheme.

### ***Rural tourism and food tourism – possible interaction***

Rural tourism is the best way to explore the traditions in Bulgaria. By staying in a farmhouse tourists can experience the traditional lifestyle and culture. The food adds value to the tourism product offerings in rural areas. Levkov (2013), in his book "Alternative types of tourism", summarizes Bulgarian authors' discussions on rural tourism, as follows: M. Stankova defines it as "a set of activities developed in the countryside and offering an alternative to the dynamic and strenuous rhythm of life in cities. It covers the transit journey through rural areas by car, bicycle, horse, stay in the house, and conducting certain research activities in connection with a hobby or profession". President of The Bulgarian Association for Rural and Ecological Tourism (BARET) P. Petrov offers the following definition of "tourism in sparsely urbanized environment, including accommodation in a farmhouse, introduction to rural life through direct participation in various agricultural and craft activities and familiarization with the rural cultural, historical and natural heritage. Analysing the specifics and development of rural tourism in Europe and in Bulgaria, Statev defines rural tourism as "tourism activities in the rural area where the main tourist services and typical rural additional tourism services have to be offered as a complementary activity of farmers". He points out one very important feature of the classic rural tourism - rural tourism occurs when tourists are welcomed in a village house and they use the services of a host (accommodation, home prepared food, homemade dishes), various additional services provided in rural environment and associated with the use of special farmhouses and other type of accommodation. Aleksieva and Stamov define rural tourism as "tourism in rural areas, which meet the interests of tourists to the traditions, customs, culture, agricultural and other specific activities as well as natural, historic and cultural resources of the region in peaceful and informal human relationships".

Often the differences in approaches and definitions of rural tourism is large due to the fact that the rural environment can be a place to practice of other types and forms of alternative tourism such as ecological, cultural, culinary (food) etc. This shows that the boundary between rural and other types of tourism carried out in rural areas, do not almost exist.

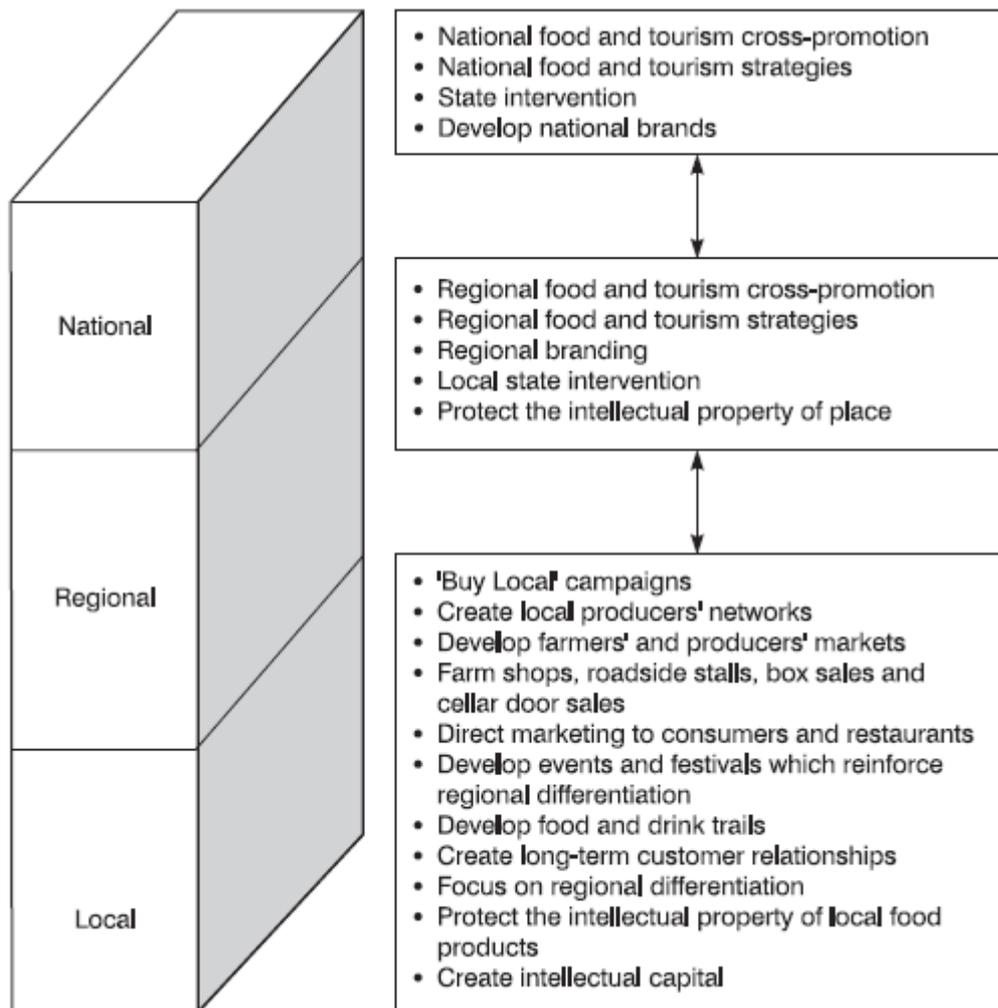


Figure 1 Relationship between national, regional and local food, tourism and regional development (source: Hall, et.al. 2003, p.58)

A key prerequisite for the development of rural tourism is the authentic character of the products. Therefore rural and food tourism have their basis for networking.

In the concept for tourism zoning of Bulgaria (2015) in order to accurately distinguish the types of tourism and the use of a single terminology, based on officially accepted and globally market-imposed definitions, a classification of the main types of tourism and their subtypes is designed and adapted to the Bulgarian market specifics. The rural tourism is divided into etno, eco and agro tourism. Eco-rural tourism is defined as a travel to rural areas with the main objective: a stay in clean environment, consumption of green products, communication with nature and local communities. The culinary (food) tourism is

defined as travel outside the permanent residence, which primary goal is tasting food and drinks typical for a particular destination. The concept defines as well as gourmet tourism - kind of culinary tourism, with a requirement for exclusiveness in the quality and uniqueness of the food and beverages. A particular geographic location of Bulgaria, the wealth of natural and cultural resources and preserved food traditions favour the gourmet tourism development, especially in rural areas, where it can be combined with other alternative forms of tourism (Grigorova et al., 2015).

Food tourism may be defined as visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific location for which food tasting and/or experiencing the

attributes of specialist food production region are the primary motivating factor for travel (Hall et.al., 2003) It attracts many national as well foreign foodies who seeks new food experience. The relation between different types of tourism where food has different positions – from main factor for choosing destination (gourmet tourism) to basic service together with accommodation (rural tourism) can be found. When food is a main factor for destination choice the food tourism may possibly be regarded as an example of culinary, gastronomic, gourmet or cuisine tourism that reflects consumers for whom interest in food and wine is a form of “serious leisure” (Hall et.al., 2003). The range between “high interest” and “low/no interest” describes tourist primary motive for travelling: from all tourist activities that are food related to “just a stop to eat”. Food tourism can be described once as a part of rural tourism when traditional food and regional specialties are offered to tourist, and as a part of cultural tourism when tourists discover the destination through food, wine and cultural heritage.

According to the survey of foreign tourists in Bulgaria, made within a project of the Ministry of Tourism, 72% of the respondents indicated that good food is a factor in selecting a destination. This is the most recognizable feature of Bulgaria according to the tourists. Food / beverages are placed third after nature and slopes in assessing the satisfaction of tourists’ stay, giving them an assessment at 4.49 from maximum 5. Food / drinks are in second place as a factor influencing satisfaction of tourists (coefficient 0, 47 after accommodation, which has 0.5). Culinary and wine tourism practice - respectively 11.7% and 6.6% of the tourists and other 15% declared that they want to try food tourism and over 18% - wine tourism.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

The fundamental of this study is to analyze the potential for rural food tourism development in Bulgaria. The increasing trend of market demand has to be well understood and used by the tourism actors in rural areas to evaluate the potential of rural food tourism and to improve their performance. The focus is on analysis of the environment, which may influence the development of this type of tourism in Bulgaria. Some statistical data made by official state bodies in Bulgaria are presented in order to support the

statement that Bulgarian cuisine is recognizable by tourist, especially in rural areas where it has long traditions. Regional gastronomy as a tourism resource is a key element in rural tourism performance and can be used as a tool for the development of tourism in the area. This study is important insofar as regional gastronomy is underutilized as a tool for regional development. The food is considered a natural complement to the tourist service in rural areas often overlooked by locals as a resource with potential for development of a regional brand. Growing trend in food tourism demand globally requires analysis of the factors that would influence its development in Bulgaria. Our country has potential, but has so far failed to capitalize on profitable both for tourists and for the local community. The PESTLE analysis is used to assess the external factors in relation to rural food tourism situation in Bulgaria. It also helps to identify SWOT factors and give lastly conclusions and recommendations.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

The increased demand for rural tourism with an emphasis on traditional foods is a result of many factors, but most common are demographics and household changes; increased requirements to food quality, including health and wellness aspects; revaluation of the food as cultural heritage of destinations; sustainability awareness etc. An ageing population and changes in life styles reinforce the food tourism opportunities. Gastronomy allows tourists to access the cultural and historical heritage of destinations through tasting, experiencing and purchasing (UNWTO, 2012). Travelers want to experience authentic dishes and they look for local food experience.

Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union also includes rural tourism as a way for sustainable rural development, and in particular Bulgaria has the prerequisites for development this type of tourism. Food production in rural areas in Bulgaria is mainly associated with ecological and organic production. Emerging consumer demand for rural tourism product, however, lacks actors of offering this tourism product, unpreparedness of local stakeholders to restructure their activities, especially the farms, and personnel crisis at both levels operating staff and management.

In order to emphasize the opportunities and to highlight weaknesses in the development of rural tourism in Bulgaria with an emphasis on traditional Bulgarian foods PESTLE analysis is used. PEST(LE) analysis takes into account key aspects of the external environment: political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental, whose analysis is based on the identification of changes in this environment and how they affect an organization or business. The analysis of the external environment is necessary

and regular activity for any business throughout its successful existence. Results allow the definition of strategic perspectives in two main directions: opportunities for development and future threats, unforeseen at current stage. Among the main drivers of change in an industry could be: changes in user demand; the emergence of new products and new technologies; changes in legislation and public policy; changes in values, lifestyles, etc.

Levels	Potential	Obstacles
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Bulgarian agricultural, tourism and food production policies (Rural Development programme 2014-2020; Tourism Law; Tourism zoning; different regulations and strategies).</li> <li>➤ the important role that national and local authorities can play in supporting local food supply chains, with consequent benefits for local economies and communities.</li> <li>➤ protected geographical products stimulate the rural economy and keep people in the area, as it should only be produced there, according to EU regulations. Goods can apply for funding from EU.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ weak regional policy.</li> <li>➤ unsatisfactory results of Leader and LAGs from the previous programming period.</li> <li>➤ lack of experience in intersectoral collaboration.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ new demand in the local economy, generating local jobs and incomes.</li> <li>➤ short supply chains of local markets, proven to increase incomes, give more autonomy to farmers and strengthen local economies through more support for small businesses.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ depopulation of rural land abandonment, seizing land for non-agricultural needs and aging population in the villages are different faces of weak national economies.</li> <li>➤ low wages and only seasonal employment.</li> <li>➤ economic development via tourism in many rural areas and its promotion is synonymous with small-business promotion and the industry is heavily characterized by small, family-centered enterprises (Fleischer A., Felsenstein D., 2000)</li> <li>➤ globalization of the food market.</li> </ul>
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ rich culinary heritage of a given geographical area or community.</li> <li>➤ social cohesion and craft support.</li> <li>➤ food shared (festivals, fairs, celebrations, gastronomic itineraries, museums, traditional restaurants etc.).</li> <li>➤ local brand identity.</li> <li>➤ network, clusters.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ the observed population decline in rural areas leads to loss of social contacts and cultural identity.</li> <li>➤ disconnecting traditions.</li> <li>➤ Traditional production in the country for the most part is not subject to marketing, mainly closed in families, and manufacturers do not act as business entities.</li> </ul>

<b>Technological</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ an emerging tech trend requires advertising and marketing of rural and food tourism in tourism portals, blogs, social media etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ poor communication network.</li> </ul>
<b>Legal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ legalization of homemade food retail (EU Regulation, 2010; Food Law; Tourism Law; etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ lack of a legal framework for artisanal food.</li> <li>➤ formal and mechanical adaptation of national legislation to the European framework, disregarding the need to preserve craft industries as part of national identity.</li> </ul>
<b>Environmental</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ reduce carbon emissions from food distribution.</li> <li>➤ sustainable tourism involves the preservation and enhancement of cultural and natural heritage - from the arts to local cuisine, or the preservation of biodiversity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ sanitary requirements for making homemade food; product traceability;</li> <li>➤ small number foods with protected geographical names;</li> <li>➤ local and regional policy for agri-environment and climate.</li> </ul>

#### 4. Conclusion

Rural tourism in Bulgaria is a promising sector of the tourism industry, but still remains directly dependent on socio-economic development of rural areas. Many of the rural areas (which are 81% of the country territory) define tourism as a priority for development. However there is a lack of assessment of the potential for sector development, both in terms of statistics of resources, accommodation facilities and tourists flow and funding resources and investments. The bad condition of social, technical and road infrastructure in rural areas also hinders the development of tourism. A small part of farmers perceive rural tourism as a way of diversifying their activities and opportunity for additional income.

At the same time one of the main obstacles to the development of food tourism, in particular in rural areas, is the lack of a culinary zoning. The presence of culinary map and national calendar of culinary holidays in Bulgaria would oriented, on the one hand, the tourists what specialties and products are characteristic of a given area, and another - would facilitated tour operators in the creation and supply of specialized products in the food tourism. Food tourism is directly linked to the production of authentic products locally, with agriculture and livestock, which are essential prerequisites for the development of culinary regions. Wine tours have been relatively recently popular, due to the large investment in winemaking and advertising of Bulgaria as a

destination for wine tourism. A large part of the cellars built tasting rooms and regularly organize events to promote the wine production. Eg. 8 wineries in the region of Plovdiv and a wine bar united in developing a wine route, creating the first joint general wine card in the country. In the spring of 2016 the city will host the very prestigious festival "Concours Mondial de Bruxelles". The competition will bring together more than 300 sommeliers from 5 continents. The combination of a food and wine tourism can certainly contribute to the development of Bulgaria as a tourist destination.

Promoting local producers and local handicrafts and regional initiatives for direct supplies from manufacturers to the tourism enterprises is the right way to overcome the problems with the supply of local products, improve communication between suppliers and consumers and strengthen regional economic cooperation. Food tourism in rural areas also needs proper advertising strategy, as along with representation of the authentic cuisine of different tourist regions of Bulgaria on national and international tourism forums, can be used and the mechanism of so called "food shared" – festivals, fairs, celebrations, gastronomic itineraries, food museums, traditional restaurants, etc. Fundamentally, in the field of marketing and promotion the importance presented by gastronomy is based on a strategy to build the image and the brand of the destinations. Key factors in this matter are: development of high-quality and credible promotional tools-such as gastronomic guides-the organization of events,

the media and use of the Internet and social networks (Gheorghe et al., 2014).

The paper contributed to the statement that rural tourism with an emphasis on locally produced food can contribute to the development of rural areas and integrated approach to sustainable development through it will bring economic, social and environmental benefits. Priorities for sustainable and balanced development of the regions require a reassessment of resources in terms of sustainable development of agriculture, food industry and tourism as sectors that could not be developed separately.

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