

THE REGION OF GASTRONOMY PROGRAM - A FACTOR FOR EMPOWERING LOCAL COMMUNITIES

D.FORIS¹ M. I. LUPU² T. FORIS³ O.V. CORDERO-AHIMAN⁴

Abstract: *The purpose of the paper is to analyse the initiatives aimed at raising awareness of local communities on the importance of protecting and promoting distinct goods for sustainable food, culture, arts, and tourism, at EU level, to balance globalized food trends. The study carries out a comparative analysis at the level of three European Regions of Gastronomy: Coimbra Region, Sibiu Region and South Aegean Region. The key areas of the Region of Gastronomy Award program: raising citizen awareness about the food they eat, the value of local products and the need to innovate to protect local products. The benefits of such initiatives and their contribution to empowering local communities and to better quality of life were identified and highlighted.*

Key words: *gastronomy, food cultures, sustainable tourism, local products, local community.*

1. Introduction

Understanding the cultural heritage in terms of intangible and tangible value or historical and socio-economic value, including in terms of gastronomic heritage, is an important feature of a society in the modern world, regardless of a country's location or the ethnicity of society (Jeroscenkova et al., 2016). The gastronomic heritage is a part of cultural heritage, and contemporary man is becoming increasingly interested in aspects of reconstruction and preservation of cultural traditions, authentic cuisine, gastronomic customs and traditions, and the promotion of local products (Rivza et al., 2017). Today, people are interested in traditional foods, food preparation techniques and traditions of

¹ *Transilvania University of Braşov, Faculty of Food and Tourism, diana.foris@unitbv.ro, ORCID ID 0000-0002-3895-0103*

² *Transilvania University of Braşov, Faculty of Food and Tourism, lupu.mirabela@unitbv.ro, ORCID ID 0000-0002-8467-7558*

³ *Transilvania University of Braşov, Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration, tiberiu.foris@unitbv.ro, ORCID ID 0000-0002-8209-1633*

⁴ *University of Cuenca, Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences, otilia.cordero@ucuenca.edu.ec, ORCID ID 0000-0002-5446-4383*

consuming them, moreover, they want to see gastronomic traditions not only nationally but also regionally and even locally (Kruzmetra et al., 2018). Moreover, people have begun to prefer foods and foods considered healthy, those that are poorly processed and do not contain food additives, derived from organic farming (Foris et al., 2016).

The gastronomy, as a marker of local culture, has become an important factor in the formation of destination identity and could be used successfully to differentiate between tourist destinations with similar appearance (Egresi, Buluç, 2016).

Local gastronomy and gastronomic tourism have been treated by many authors in the specialty literature: the role of local food in destination marketing (Du Rand et al., 2003; Fox, 2007; Okumuş et al., 2007; Egresi, Buluç, 2016), culinary tourism (Iwan, Iwan, 2014; Stewart, et al., 2008), food tourism (Henderson, 2009), gastronomy as a tourist product (Richards, 2002, Scarpato, 2002a), the ways in which the culinary units play the role of intermediary between tourists and the local cuisine, and also the authenticity of dishes and the varieties of culinary experience (Cohen, Avieli, 2004), food experiences in tourism (Quan, Wang, 2004), sustainable gastronomic tourism (Scarpato, R. 2002b; Yurtseven, 2011; Gheorghe et al., 2013).

The Region of Gastronomy Award provides credibility for regions, but in the same time, it provides the occasion for communities to work together towards a shared objective and, therefore ensures great benefits in terms of local cohesion. The Award has captured the minds and hearts of many that see this is a pioneering effort to empower regions by supporting their food and cultural initiatives and providing a platform from which to promote regional diversity and richness. (The European Region of Gastronomy Platform, 2019).

IGCAT and its flagship European Regions of Gastronomy Platform and Award has quickly gained significant recognition in Europe, but it starts to be recognised also on other continents. On 23 January 2020, Saint Augustine – Saint Johns County (Florida) signed a declaration of intention with IGCAT to become the first candidate American Region of Gastronomy for 2023 and lead on the creation of an American Region of Gastronomy Platform (The European Region of Gastronomy Platform, 2019).

Candidate and awarded Regions of Gastronomy from Europe, guided by IGCAT, are working together with the long-term aim to contribute to better quality of life (The European Region of Gastronomy Platform, 2019) by:

- raising awareness about the importance of cultural and food uniqueness,
- stimulating creativity and gastronomic innovation,
- educating for better nutrition,
- improving sustainable tourism standards.

The purpose of this study is to analyse initiatives aimed at raising awareness among local communities about the importance of protecting and promoting distinct goods for sustainable food, culture, arts, and tourism, through the prism of European Regions of Gastronomy. The aim of the analysis is to provide an insight regarding the gastronomy and the cultural strategy plan for this regions and the challenges that the region wishes to address by holding the Award, found in Awarded regions bid books, are of a nature to lead us to the identification of guidelines and good practices on empowering local communities and strengthening and expanding synergies created to promote

sustainable regional development through gastronomy and can be a source of inspiration for other regions.

2. Methodology

Considering the research problem, a survey was conducted using the observation method and we identified on European Regions of Gastronomy Platform which are the candidate and awarded Regions of Gastronomy from Europe, known up to this moment. These are: Minho (2016), Catalonia (2016), Riga Gauja (2017), East Lombardie (2017), Aarhus - Central Denmark (2017), North Brabant (2018), Galway – West of Ireland (2018), South Aegean (2019), Sibiu (2019), Koupio (2020), Coimbra Region (2021), Slovenia (2021), Trondheim – Trondelag (2022) and Menorca (2022).

The study carries out a comparative analysis at the level of three European Regions of Gastronomy.

To select the 3 regions for analysis, we considered the following criteria: the size of the region - to be of medium level; the type of region - to include in the analysis both awarded destinations but also one candidate, the application period - to be recent and two of the destinations to be awarded in the same year. The three European Regions of Gastronomy that have been selected are: Coimbra Region - from Portugal, Sibiu Region - from Romania and South Aegean Region - from Greece.

Located in the centre of the country, the Region of Coimbra, has a diversity of landscapes, from the mountainous inland to the amazing beaches and is thus considered to be not only one of the most beautiful regions in Europe, but also the cradle of the most beloved traditions of Portugal. With a population of 460.000 inhabitants, the land comes with a variety of offers, with a mix of ingredients and flavours, with unique foods, all for the simple and pure pleasure of the tourists that come and visit it. We can say without a shadow of the doubt that here, in this magic land, gastronomy is knowledge, is the art of the cuisine, that brings together producers, consumers, professionals, students, amateurs and, of course, tourists (Coimbra Region, 2019).

From Southern Transylvania comes, included with a unique cultural and natural scenery, the beautiful region of Sibiu, along with its surrounding areas: Mărginimea Sibiului, Țara Oltului, Valea Târnavelor, Valea Hârtibaciului and Țara Secașelor. With a population of 464.305 inhabitants, similar in numbers with the region of Coimbra, and just as rich in the exceptional heritage and traditions, the Sibiu Region is defined by a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural community. With a vivid cultural life, a touristic profile and being well known as a former European Capital of Culture, benefiting from all these valuable treasures, along with the traditions and customs, Sibiu stands as viable touristic destination, where the food culture has a main role (Sibiu, 2019).

Last, but not least, bringing with it the unreal beauty of The Cyclades and Dodecanese island groups from the central and south-eastern Aegean Archipelagos, comes to our attention The South Aegean Region from Greece. Being divided into 13 regional units, formed around major islands: Andros, Kea-Kythnos, Syros, Thira (Santorini), Milos, Mykonos, Naxos, Tinos, Paros, Rhodes, Kos, Kalymnos and Karpathos, the region has a population of 308.610 inhabitants and numbering more than 50 inhabited islands in

total. Each of these islands enjoys a unique peculiarity, a different historical background and culture and, also, a special geophysical environment and, none the least a gastronomic identity with a diversity of local products. And we wouldn't make a mistake, if we talked about it as 'Heaven on Earth' (South Aegean, 2019).

We will continue to evaluate the selected European Regions of Gastronomy, and for this we will develop the set of evaluation criteria. The set of analysis criteria has been developed to take into account both key areas, but also focus on the areas of the World Region of Gastronomy programme: (1) feeding the planet,(2) innovation, creativity and job opportunities, (3) educating for our future, (4) balanced and sustainable tourism, (5) connecting urban and rural areas, (6) well-being and healthier living, (7) raising awareness of local communities, (8) raising citizen awareness about the food they eat,(9) raising the value of local products,(10) raising the need to innovate in order to protect local products,(11) digital agenda.

Each of these criteria will be analyzed and evaluated in terms of its importance at the level of each region analyzed and will receive an evaluation score, on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 less important - 5 very important). The criteria were ranked by The Pair Comparison Method and then, by multiplying between the criterion score and its grade for each region, the total score by which we designate the region with the best program, as an example of good practice.

3. Results and discussions

Coimbra Region: A Million Food Stories - the land from where food stories come to life – where people sell their stories due to their identity, diversity and authenticity of territories and local communities, all these reflected in gastronomy narratives as well (Coimbra Region, 2019).

Sibiu Richness and Legendary Tastes - the land where over two millennia of European medieval and archaic confluence unite to give you a unique flavour (Sibiu, 2019).

The Region of the South Aegean: Taste the seasons - adventures, experiences, myths and reflections combine to offer a perfect gastronomical taste where the sun, the beaches and the relaxed way of life of the islanders are reflected (Taste the Seasons, 2019).

In the following we will present the results of the comparative analysis of the three selected regions, following the 11 criteria stated above, in order to draw some conclusions that will guide us to an optimum in making such a bid book.

1. Feeding the Planet. This criterion is based on the rational consumption of food, the avoidance of waste, the conservation of biodiversity and sustainable economic development. Great importance is given to the protection of the bees, it is estimated that their extinction as a species will lead to the extinction of the human species. Even if The Coimbra Region did not address the issue explicitly in its program, the criterion is implicitly achieved by the way of designing the project implementation plan. The Sibiu Region places great emphasis on sustainable economic development because the main forms of tourism encountered are mountain tourism, agrotourism, cultural tourism and

spa tourism. Here we meet a gastronomic diversity given by ethnic diversity - Romanians, Germans, Hungarians, Gypsies. Sibiu has tried to impose its own culinary imprint on world gastronomy. The South Aegean region is also based on multiculturalism, Balkan influences – Greek, Turkish and Albanian. The Mediterranean cuisine - based mainly on fruits and vegetables, fish and seafood, dairy, olive oil, is considered one of the healthiest in the world, here we find the longest life expectancy in Europe. The food waste is discouraged, overweight is very rare in the population, and environmental concerns are evident.

2. Innovation, creativity and job opportunities. The globalization brings both opportunities and threats to local gastronomy. The competition entails the need for adaptability through increased creativity, the growing involvement of digital platforms in the design of tourism products and the emergence of new jobs in an expanding industry. All three regions are concerned about this criterion. The Coimbra Region combines the local tradition with aromas from Asia, America and Africa due to its colonial influences for centuries. The innovation is the combination of these influences in a perfect local gastronomy. The employment force in the field is increasing, reaching a deficit covered by the import of human resources from Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe. The multicultural Sibiu Region has innovated the local cuisine with multi-ethnic influences in a Transylvanian cuisine presented at many festivals organized in the Central Square of the city, the largest medieval square in Europe and in The Ethnographic Museum, The Europe's largest open-air museum. As well, here, the number of jobs has grown steadily in recent years. The South Aegean Region has innovated traditional Greek cuisine through Turkish and Albanian influences, resulting in a reference cuisine for the entire Balkan area. Influences are also manifested in beverages, alcoholic or non-alcoholic. The number of jobs has continued to grow here and there, using local and Balkan labor.

3. Educating for our future. The criterion refers to the governmental involvement in education on a healthy life by introducing in the school the subjects of profile study. The principle of ensuring healthy food for everyone is based on the importance of using local products in food and cultivating local values and pride, vital for long-term cultural survival in the face of globalization. The Coimbra Region has created an integrated schooling system in the field of gastronomy that includes both the vocational level - School of Hospitality and Tourism of Coimbra and the university level in the field of health, agriculture and polytechnic. Conferences and seminars are organized in the field where practice specialists, journalists, bloggers are also involved. Dissemination of the results leads to an increase in the awareness of the population about local gastronomy and healthy living and an increase in the degree of pride in belonging to the local culture. The Sibiu Region also integrates education of all grades, from vocational schools, high schools of food and agricultural industry and university. The government is involved in providing a daily meal consisting in local products for all students, regardless of the form of education. There are also seminars and conferences, fairs of local products in the central square of the city and in the ethnographic museum as well as culinary competitions for the professionals, amateurs and students. The South Aegean Region has an educational strategy developed in cooperation with The Centre for

Entrepreneurial and Technological Development, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the region, the profile schools in the area and the university environment. The vocational schools have developed, the most important ones being near the port of Piraeus, near Athens. Government programs promote local products, with large stores being forced to sell only local agricultural products, and the Greeks are particularly proud of their millennial culture in all its forms.

4. Balanced and sustainable tourism. The regional gastronomy presents a special diversity not only in terms of dishes but also in terms of consumption, presentation and serving. Preserved and developed over the centuries, they form the regional cultural DNA. By collaborating with different forms of tourism and culture, the sustainable development of the region is ensured. The best ambassadors and promoters of local traditions are tourists, especially through social media. Agri-food products can be considered gastronomic tourist resources that allow tourism to develop and to have the possibility to become a tool for promoting and marketing quality agri-food products (Armesto Lopez, Gomez Martin, 2006). The Coimbra Region aims to capitalize on the gastronomic specificity by involving the local community in considering local gastronomy as a differentiating factor and development vector valuing cultural heritage, local specialists and promoting knowledge transfer between different local agents considering innovation as a factor economic development. The transversal axes - communication and marketing are essential for capitalizing on the local potential by creating events with impact and creating a distinct regional Brand, promoted globally. The Sibiu Region has various tourist resources related especially to mountain and spa tourism, pastoral traditions, crafts and cultural tourism. The local gastronomic specificity that combines Romanian, German and Hungarian and Gypsy traditions is harmoniously complemented with the local tourism in an area with a strong industrial concentration. The numerous festivals attract more and more tourists every year: even during the pandemic period, Sibiu experienced the smallest decrease in the number of tourists nationwide. The South Aegean Region through the characteristics of an island area with Balkan and Mediterranean influences completes the SSS trio - Sand, Sun and Sea - characteristic of Greece, with a specific local gastronomy, known throughout the world and served in famous taverns. The hospitality industry and tourism ensure the sustainable development of the region and are the main source of income for locals.

5. Connecting urban and rural areas. In recent years, there has been a growing differentiation between urban and rural lifestyles. Many city dwellers no longer have the faintest idea of how food is produced, or the spiritual connection between man and nature in agricultural processes. A majority of children saw cattle only in the Milka chocolate advertisement and are convinced that they are purple and saw only frozen chickens, being unable to make the connection between chickens and eggs. The purpose of this criterion is to ensure a reconnection of man with nature and agriculture, the reevaluation of the traditions of the production and the consumption in order to improve the quality of life and increase cohesion between the urban and the rural areas. The Coimbra Region, located in central Portugal, is characterized by a great

geographical, climatic and cultural diversity, from the Atlantic coast to the mountainous area, from urban agglomerations to isolated villages. Within this diversity, action is taken to capitalize on local products through various events –artcraft fairs, ethnography and folklore, gastronomy. The recognition of local riches is intended to stimulate the consumption of seasonal products from local producers respecting the seasonal cycle of agricultural production, shortening supply chains and designing diets close to the Mediterranean. By strengthening the urban-rural links, synergistic effects are obtained at the level of the entire region. The Sibiu Region is a mountainous region located in the center of Romania, the main occupation in rural areas being sheep breeding and pastoral crafts. As the mountain villages are located at great distances, the traditions are relatively different. Due to the sheep migration in winter to northern Greece, many customs, including culinary ones, were brought to Macedonia, making a special connection to The Balkans. Being until approx. five decades ago a predominantly rural region, the connection between the village and the town has been very well preserved nowadays. It is a region where traditions are highly valued and exploited from a touristic point of view. The South Aegean Region is characterized by geographical dispersion being formed by the 669 islands of the two archipelagos, spread over an area of 5286 km². The population is almost 310,000 inhabitants, which indicates a low population density, especially in rural areas. The traditions have been preserved here for hundreds of years, people being in close contact with the nature, the mountainous islands and the sea, from where they get their food. Tourists love these traditions - crafts and specific culinary art.

6. Well-being and healthier living. Food is vital for the health, culture and general well-being of the population, and therefore efforts to protect local biodiversity must be a priority. The gastronomy is the art of eating healthily and, using creativity, a holistic approach to well-being is pursued. The Coimbra Region, characterized by bio-diversity, strives for its conservation and enhancement through a diverse and healthy cuisine inspired by the Mediterranean one. The Sibiu Region is a relatively homogeneous, mountainous region, with a high degree of afforestation, and a degree of pollution well below the European average. The inhabitants traditionally consume local products and the life expectancy is the highest at national level. The islands of South Aegean Region, an area free from industrial pollution, with a specific Mediterranean cuisine, and has the highest life expectancy in Europe along with the region northern Italy.

7. Raising awareness of local communities. Awareness of local communities on specific values and cultural differences of any kind is essential for capitalizing on what is specific and creating complex tourism products as a market offering. All three studied regions have programs to raise awareness and educate the population to know the local specifics, transmitting among young people the feelings of belonging and local pride. These programs target both the school and the community as a whole.

8. Raising citizen awareness about the food they eat. Raising citizens' awareness of what they eat is a concern of all governments and local communities in Europe, both in terms of public health and economics. Concerns support the consumption of products

grown within a radius of no more than 50 km, fresh and unfrozen, cooked at lower temperatures so as not to alter their qualities. The Coimbra Region and the South Aegean Region are relatively similar in terms of climate and geography and have Mediterranean-style diets based on local products - fish and seafood, dairy, vegetables, olive oil. Non-alcoholic beverages consist of fruit juices and alcoholic beverages and wines and distilled beverages, usually from grapes or other local fruits. The Sibiu Region is a mountainous region, the diets consisting mainly of different specialties of pork or sheep, less beef and dairy. Among the most used vegetables are potatoes, cabbage and onions. The drinks are mainly distilled from plums, pears or apples and grapes. A basic food specific to the region is, as in Italy, corn flour polenta, usually in combination with dairy products.

9. Raising the value of local products. All three regions have provided in their programs strategies for increasing the value of local products through the achievement of added value and through intense ads, especially in gastronomic events. These are an integral part of the development strategy of each region.

10. Raising the need to innovate to protect local produce. The growing need for innovation to protect local products is also on the agenda of each region, although the Coimbra Region has not explicitly stated this. At European level, there are mechanisms for the recognition, attestation, and patenting of local food products, which have a designation of origin. Moreover, the Sibiu Region aims to create collective brands that certify and guarantee the geographical origin of raw materials and food products of Sibiu, by developing and substantiating the concept of local gastronomic mark.

11. Digital agenda. The Digital Agenda concept aims to better exploit the potential of information and communication technologies (ICT) to encourage innovation, growth and progress (Rivza et al., 2019) both at the level of SMEs and at the level of tourist destinations. The digital agenda is also important, especially in the current context of the pandemic, and all three regions have included it in their programs, even though Coimbra did not mention it as a separate title. The digital agenda is one of the key focus areas for the Sibiu and South Aegean Regions. From online bookings to the design of complex tourist products or the choice of menu at the restaurant, all this is gaining ground over the classic methods. Focusing on the South Aegean region has taken a two-pronged approach: one for the agricultural field - which is sometimes isolated due to the distance and fragmentation that some of the islands face more than others, and one from the perspective of digital communication and advertising media - especially in terms of marking the region as a gastronomic tourist destination.

Next, to deepen the analysis we used a method of weighting the analysis criteria, namely the method of pair comparison used in The Decision Theory (Foris, Constantin, 1999).

Following the analysis performed by the research team, the following weighting of the evaluation criteria resulted (Table 1):

Table 1

Weighting of evaluation criteria

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	C11
C1	-	1	1	0.5	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.5
C2	0	-	0.5	0.5	0	1	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0
C3	0	0.5	-	0	0	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0
C4	0.5	0.5	1	-	0.5	1	1	1	1	1	0
C5	0	1	1	0.5	-	1	1	1	1	1	0
C6	0	0	0.5	0	0	-	0	0	0	0	0
C7	0	0.5	0.5	0	0	1	-	0.5	0.5	0.5	0
C8	0	0.5	0.5	0	0	1	0.5	-	0.5	0.5	0
C9	0	0.5	0.5	0	0	1	0.5	0.5	-	0.5	0
C10	0	0.5	0.5	0	0	1	0.5	0.5	0.5	-	0
C11	0.5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	-
K	1	5	6	2	2.5	9.5	6.5	6.5	6.5	6.5	0.5

(note: C1 ... C11 - analysis criteria; K-the importance coefficients attached to the criteria)

Following the application of the pair comparison model, the following hierarchy of the 11 analysis criteria results:

$$C6 > C7, C8, C9, C10 > C3 > C2 > C5 > C4 > C1 > C11$$

Given the results obtained using the pair comparison method in this analysis, the 11 criteria were evaluated and classified (Table 2) as follows:

Table 2

Evaluation system of the analyzed criteria at the level of three European Regions of Gastronomy

No.	Criteria	Points Coimbra Region (n)	Points Sibiu Region (n)	Points South Aegean Region (n)	Granted rating (k)
1	Feeding the planet	1	1	4	1
2	Innovation, creativity, and job opportunities	5	5	4	5
3	Educating for our future	3	5	4	6
4	Balanced and sustainable tourism	5	4	4	2
5	Connecting urban and rural areas	5	5	5	2.5
6	Well-being and healthier living	5	5	5	9.5
7	Raising awareness of local communities	4	3	4	6.5
8	Raising citizen awareness about the food they eat	4	4	4	6.5
9	Raising the value of local products	4	4	5	6.5
10	Raising the need to innovate to protect local produce	4	4	4	6.5

11	Digital agenda	1	5	5	0.5
	Scor total	213.5	217	224	
	Σ nxk				

(notes: n –notes from 1 to 5 (5 = very good, 1 = unsatisfaying) were given by consensus by the research team following the comparative analysis of the bid books of the three regions, k - granted rating (Σ n The grades were then weighted with the rating value of the 11 criteria, resulting in a total score (Σ nxk))

The criteria that obtained the highest rating are Well-being and healthier living (9.5), Raising awareness of local communities (6.5), Raising citizen awareness about the food they eat (6.5), Raising the value of local products (6.5) and Raising the need to innovate in order to protect local produce (6.5).

Following this analysis, the program of the Coimbra Region ranked first, followed by Sibiu and the South Aegean Region. The Coimbra Region Bid Book is thus recommended as an example of good practice for designing such programs.

3. Conclusions

The benefits of European Regions of Gastronomy initiative and their contribution to empowering local communities and to improve quality of life were identified and highlighted. In this sense, the results of the analysis of the three selected European gastronomic regions, respectively Coimbra, Sibiu and South Aegean - the analysis made in a comparative vision, using the model and set of evaluation criteria developed (11 criteria) - leads us to formulate the following considerations: The brand "Coimbra Region, European Region of Gastronomy 2021" empowering the local communities by involving them in consolidating the regional gastronomic identity, improves the regional gastronomic heritage and contributes to the recognition of gastronomy as a differentiating and potential factor of local dynamics; The brand "Sibiu, European Region of Gastronomy 2019" represents the beginning of a development program of Sibiu towards a destination that ensures the economic prosperity of the inhabitants of this region, towards a prosperous and sustainable tourist destination - an increasingly attractive area to live there and to be visited, based on respect for traditions and the principles of sustainability; The brand "The Region of the South Aegean, European Region of Gastronomy 2019" provided a much needed motivation for locals and communities, who are extremely proud of their cultural heritage.

All these show us the benefits of capitalizing at a higher level, as a local brand, on local gastronomic values. From here, everyone has something to gain - local producers and processors who develop their market, community, and local authorities by increasing revenues to local budgets, tourists who benefit from unique experiences. Paradoxically, in the context of accentuated globalization, the attitudes of preserving local values as a form of preserving cultural identity are increasingly evident.

The successful European model 'European Regions of Gastronomy' can be extended globally, especially to South America, an area with a unique millennial cultural heritage.

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