

Article

Rural Tourism Destination: The Ligurian Farmers' Perspective

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Abstract: Rural tourism is considered a high potential form of tourism, enhanced by the demand for more sustainable and nature-based solutions, and able to contribute to territory resilience. A rural area is not necessarily a tourist destination, but it might become one, if agricultural enterprises are willing to diversify their economic activities by investing in rural tourism, and local actors provide active support and co-participation. This research focuses on the development of rural tourism in hinterland, mountainous, and hilly areas of the province of Savona in Liguria (North-West of Italy) in order to gather the farmers' perspectives about local rural tourism destination development. Liguria is known above all as a seaside tourist destination. In recent years, policy makers have initiated a debate with local actors to relaunch Ligurian tourism by trying to develop alternative forms of tourism, such as rural tourism. A sample of 32 farmers already proposing rural tourism activities such as agritourism were involved in a mixed methodological approach aimed at validating local interest toward rural tourism and collecting information for designing future local development policies. At first, a questionnaire set up by a panel of experts was carried out, followed by one-to-one semi-structured interviews, and finally the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) was used to identify local priorities, strategies, and tools. The results highlight the willingness of farmers to invest in the rural tourism sector, the presence of heterogeneous interests, and the complexity of management of the relationship among the various stakeholders. Findings are partially explained by the early stage of development of rural tourism in the analyzed area, a phase in which starting a constructive dialogue on objective and project ideas among all stakeholders seems to be a crucial priority among the farmers taking part in the study.



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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, European and Italian rural areas have experienced a deep change characterized by the need for a multifunctional vision of agriculture, reconnecting agricultural activities to society and generating economic opportunities for rural communities. This vision has been opening the way for nontraditional strategies to sustain rural communities, and in particular for rural tourism and related entrepreneurial opportunities [1]. It has strengthened the role of farms as central players in the local rural economy and tourism development, expanding their objectives. In fact, farms (are expected to) become a place where several activities occur alongside agricultural production. Examples include: educational activities (e.g., farm education, agricultural daycare), short food chain (e.g., direct sales), tourism (e.g., agritourism), etc.

This development has been supported by the European Union agricultural policy, which has been following the growing demand for healthier and more sustainable consumption and a slower lifestyle to rediscover the relationship between rural areas and

society. Therefore, a specific goal for modern rural farms is the agritourism business. The UNWTO defines rural tourism as “a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s experience is related to a wide range of products generally related to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling and sightseeing. Rural tourism activities take place in non-urban (rural) areas with the following characteristics: (i) low population density, (ii) landscape and land use dominated by agriculture and forestry, and (iii) traditional social structure and lifestyle” [2]. Hence, rural tourism is one of the forms of tourism with high potential, as it contributes to rural areas’ resilience, and stimulates local economic growth.

In the Italian context, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the agritourism sector had a fundamental role in maintenance and development of rural areas, under various aspects: social, economic and productive, landscape and environmental, local, and cultural. Becoming a structured component of the Italian tourism offer in 2019, there were 24,576 agritourism farms with 285,027 beds (5.5% of the total number of beds in Italy), while there were 3.8 million arrivals, contributing 2.9% of the arrivals of Italian tourism [3].

The development of multi-functionality in agriculture has allowed Italy to continue its modernization process. The year 2020 will be remembered as a year of profound transition, in society, in market, and in particular in the tourism market due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A period of crisis, certainly, but also a year of profound structural evolution in supply and demand. Rural tourism has not escaped the contraction of the market, but many farms showed strong reactive ability to face this sudden and unexpected event. In this context, some reflection on the role and future of the agritourism sector is needed to understand the future evolution of rural areas. The EU aims at reducing the environmental footprint of food systems and strengthening resilience against crises. Agritourism activities might play a crucial role in this strategy, since a relevant part of the path towards green transition and biodiversity pass from the farmer vocation to sustainability, their commitment to safeguard the environment and landscapes, and their leading role in local farming and direct sales. Hence, rural tourism might be a strategic driver for further development of rural areas. However, the creation of a governance capable of putting local actors and local capital into a system, and thus ensuring balance among production, consumption, and value creation, is needed for the final success of this initiative.

In Italy, the development of rural tourism has occurred unevenly among the various Italian regions. Liguria is one of the smallest regions in Italy, bathed by the Ligurian Sea and dominated by the Ligurian Alps and the Ligurian Apennines. Local heritage is very rich in terms of tourism attractions, such as natural sites and historical cities [4,5], and it is famous all over the world for its wonderful Cinque Terre [6], a UNESCO site. At the same time, the Liguria region is a very fragile area with high hydrogeological risks; therefore, it should be managed in a caring manner, in order to preserve its cultural, natural, and historical heritage [7–9].

As a tourism destination, the Liguria region has traditionally been centered on sea-side tourism, mainly characterized by mass tourism [10], and it has been suffering from the competition of other national and international destinations. Recently, the regional governance that manages regional tourism policies and strategies launched a program oriented at diversifying the tourist offer, evidencing the main role of an enhancement of the hinterland areas of Liguria. Thus, rural tourism may become one of the tourist drivers to recover this Italian tourist destination.

In this context, the opinion and vision of farmers willing to engage in multifunctional initiatives is a fundamental perspective that needs to be taken into consideration, as it might help to indicate the direction for future changes in the local agritourism strategy. The involvement of these stakeholders is a new phenomenon for the area under study, since in the past they were barely (or in the worst case not) included in the definition of tourism policies. In this sense, this study intends to help fill this gap. Therefore, the study aims to achieve a common path shared by this specific type of stakeholders through a three-step mixed methodological approach, in which the expert panel and questionnaire (step 1)

collected information which served as a base for individual semi-structured interviews (step 2) and the Nominal Group Technique (step 3), useful for stimulating sharing of ideas and active participation in the definition of local rural tourism policies.

The article is organized as follows: Section 2 presents a literature overview on this topic, Section 3 contains a description of the study area and the selected methodology, and Section 4 shows results of the study and related discussion. Lastly, the conclusion in Section 5 evidences the strengths and limitations of the study and suggests new possible avenues of research.

2. Literature

Nowadays, tourism is a key component of many countries' Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and thus it is not surprising that policy makers point at the tourism industry as one of the main pillars of sustainable development.

In recent decades, there was an increase in urban population with excessive land consumption. Therefore, management of urban and rural heritage becomes a priority, and agricultural multi-functionality may be a tool with beneficial effects on the local economy [11], hence the increasing attention of policy makers, and academia alike, on rural tourism and the role that it can play in territorial development. Many questions arise about the potential and benefits, both at the regional and national level, of rural tourism, and the strategies for developing rural tourism are investigated by extant literature. For example, many studies focus their attention on the positive impact of the development of agritourism activities in stimulating the adoption of sustainable best practices that could favor the improvement of natural heritage and the positive socio-economic repercussions on local communities [12–14]. Other scholars focus more on specific initiatives, as demonstrated by the rising interest in Nature-Based Solutions (NBS). These solutions aim at managing the natural and cultural heritage, in order to improve environmental and life quality in cities and villages, in urban and rural areas, as well as the quality of tourism services [15–18].

Rural tourism is characterized by four key aspects: location, sustainable development, community-based characteristics, and experiences [19].

In terms of location, the potential of the rural landscape in various areas (such as ecology, food production, culture, and tourism) suggests an opportunity to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by rural development, as well as being useful to reduce the problem of depopulation of rural areas [20].

A specific tool to support rural development is agritourism, which can balance the needs of rural communities and those of tourists, by offering real opportunities for economic and social development and at the same time mitigating undesired impacts, especially of an environmental type [21,22]. Hence, agritourism is an important way to diversify agriculture and rural areas, and it is part of the idea of sustainable and multifunctional agriculture, as it enables to use productive resources in the countryside and creates an additional source of income for both farmers and the local community [23–25].

Farms in rural areas have gradually seen an increase in the diversification of activities by the implementation of multi-functionality: tourism has become a very important asset for several farmhouses, for example culinary tourism, which is an element of tourist attraction and an important factor for improving rural tourism and local development [26]. Farmers are essential actors for the objective of planning diversification of activities in the light of multi-functionality: their reluctance is bound to reduce the impact and set limits to the pursuit of tourism diversification. That is why a thorough understanding of farmers' attitudes toward rural tourism and its deployment is fundamental for drawing rural tourism development policies [27]. Agritourism and related farmers, which in most cases are small businesses, must use existing resources in order to develop effective tourism strategies, considering that rural tourism is based on generosity and strong emotional relationships between guests and hosts, developing "philoxenia" (love for each other) and/or "nurturing nostalgia" [28–30]. To this scope, the organizational value of entrepreneurs (in this case, farmers) consists in their capability of participating and collaborating, since

a community approach to tourism development is key for the success of rural tourism destination development [1].

Innovative concepts such as “corporate social responsibility (CSR)” and “circular economy” are (more and more) also integrated into the rural tourism sector. The CSR approach is an important element for reaching the goal of multidimensional sustainability in rural tourism activities [31]: rural tourism should conduct to circular economy initiatives capable of ensuring a balance between consumption and reproduction of collective rural resources through collaboration among local actors [32,33].

Among community-based actions for successfully enhancing rural tourism local stakeholders to be proactive in their attitude and behaviors, in order to ensure a profitable position within a related field of activity, is the application of methodical marketing strategies [34]. Hence, one of the first steps in developing a rural tourist destination is the identification of the main stakeholders who might take part in the planning and implementation of tourism policies and strategies at the local level. Whilst supportive municipalities should act as facilitators for business development [35], innovative stakeholders might be requested to push the rural tourism destination towards success, for example by ensuring the right level of digitalization of the tourism services offered. Indeed, digital transformation of rural tourism can be seen as a way to solve socio-economic challenges in rural societies [36], even in terms of sustainability [37]. Accommodation management should be operated by online tools such as Instagram, Facebook, and/or specialized websites to match tourist demand with the offer by agritourism operators [38,39], since lack of online services hinders rural tourism promotion and development [40]. Updated information technologies might help with increasing the popularity of rural tourist destinations; at the same time, these technologies should always guarantee an equilibrium in local tourism development in order to avoid negative externalities [21,41]. Furthermore, digitalization and related collected data could provide information useful for increasing the attractiveness of tourist destinations [21,41], designing a more precise profile of potential tourists and figuring out their expectations in terms of rural experience.

Lastly, the development of rural tourism passes through the experience offered and its perceived quality. Some studies evidenced that the agritourism sector needs to improve visitor profiling in order to enhance its tourism offer [42] and the accessibility of rural tourism destinations [43]. Moreover, tourists’ perceptions should be based on social, emotional, and symbolic interaction with local stakeholders, so as to improve the rural experience and generate positive tourist satisfaction [44]. In this sense, memorable experiences should be proposed with the aim to feed a positive word of mouth and thus enhance local rural tourism [45]. Therefore, farmers themselves, with the support of local communities as facilitators, should increase the attractiveness of their rural destinations, reinforcing “hard” (tourist infrastructures and accommodation) and “soft” services (range of activities and special events) [35,46].

Various stakeholders, e.g., tour operators [47], policy makers [48,49], tourists/local players [50–53], should be involved in developing and reinforcing a rural tourism destination. More specifically, rural stakeholder networks, with public/private partnerships, coordinated both horizontally and vertically, are essential to make rural tourism development policies effective [54,55].

Exploring the relationships among local stakeholders in rural tourism, some authors evidenced the importance of building local networks [56], the residents’ influence on tourism policies [57,58], and the connection of local communities to the networks [59–61], via consultation between public authorities and other stakeholders, as a critical factor of success in the development of the rural touristic destination [62,63].

In all cases, a specific critical issue in planning rural tourism policies is the relationship among stakeholders: since it is very important for local development and rural tourism, it should be investigated, e.g., in terms of habits of cooperation, structure of relationships, and perception of the importance of local networks [64] and their specific characteristics, considering that there are relevant differences among them [65]. Some factors, such as

communication, resource sharing, and social interaction, should be considered, so as to facilitate and consolidate the creation of local stakeholders' networks [66,67].

Moreover, identification of the various roles and responsibilities among actors as well as definition of the factors influencing policy makers in designing a local identity are fundamental for the implementation of an effective rural tourism system [68–71]. Therefore, farmers' opinions are needed in order to develop a rural tourism destination; in certain local contexts, they can even stimulate local tourism activities [34]. Furthermore, some authors highlighted that the role of farmers, supported by association with local communities, is very important in terms of local management, since it should allow for effective use of rural heritage resources and ensure sustainability of rural settlements over time [72,73].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. The Study Area

The research was carried out in the Province of Savona, in the Liguria Region (Italy). It borders to the North with the Piedmont Region, to the West with the Province of Imperia, to the East with the Province of Genoa, and to the South with the Ligurian Sea. The Province of Savona has an area of 1544.54 km², with a total of 276,064 residents and a density of 178.74 inhabitants/km² (data referred to 31 December 2018), and with 69 municipalities. The territory appears as a combination of sea and hinterland: both landscapes are of strong interest to people who spend their holidays in Liguria. It presents a unique flora and fauna, as well as exceptional natural landscapes due to the meeting between the two main Italian mountain ranges: Alps and Apennines. Seaside tourism is still strongly rooted, but in recent years, there has been a significant increase in interest in aspects related to the Ligurian hinterland and green-natural tourism. The area of the Province of Savona is characterized by a precious cultural and gastronomic component. The hinterland of Savona is dotted with small and ancient villages and paths used for various sports activities: there are routes enabling to practice trekking, hiking, naturalistic observation, and mountain-biking. The tourist hospitality system is composed by 1365 accommodation businesses (hotels, apartments, bed and breakfasts, campsites, etc.), including 147 agritourism farms. In 2019, arrivals were 1,289,317, whilst overnight stays were 5,353,135, of which about three quarters were domestic tourists. The COVID-19 pandemic had devastating effects on the Italian tourism market in 2020, when arrivals and overnight tourists decreased by over 40% compared to 2019 in the Province of Savona.

3.2. Methodology

This study focused on the analysis of a particular type of stakeholders in the Province of Savona, namely the owners of farmhouses. They are primary stakeholders for the phenomenon of local rural tourism [74–76], they know the main themes as they have a direct experience of rural tourism blocking and success factors and, at the same time, they are the stakeholders less involved in the definition of related policies. Hence the need to focus on this category. In order to select the group of farmers, a sector organization, namely Coldiretti (Savona area), was involved. Coldiretti is the main representative organization of agricultural entrepreneurship at the national and European level, with one and a half million members. There are 70 farmhouses associated with Coldiretti (Savona area), which is 50% of the farmhouses located in the study area.

The research process was divided into three stages. In the first, a questionnaire was submitted on the basis of a complete analysis aimed at identifying the peculiarities of the area under assessment in relation to possible development of rural tourism. In the second phase, individual interviews were carried out to gather information from farmers. Finally, a meeting was organized among all companies included in the survey, structured in two phases: presentation of the results of the second phase and discussion of the results by sharing ideas for a common project (Table 1).

Table 1. Stages of the qualitative analysis involving the farmers.

Stages	Methods	Context	Goals
First	Questionnaire design	2 researchers and 4 rural tourism experts	Identification of the peculiarities of the Province of Savona for semi-structured interviews and of the farmers to include in the study
Second	Semi-structured interviews	32 farmers	Individual interviews with farmers in order to define opinions on rural tourism development in the Province of Savona
Third	Nominal Group Technique	32 farmers	First step: presentation of interview results Second step: Identification of common priorities

The latter was divided into phases aimed at identifying the farmers really interested in collecting information, discussing the information, and stimulating possible affinities and shared ideas in order to identify a common strategy for the development of local rural tourism.

This iterative methodology can be more efficient in generating solutions and consensus, as it is based upon previous group responses, and it is widely used in investigating tourism sectors [77,78], among others rural tourism [79–82] and hospitality [83,84]. Past research has shown that this method is more effective than other methods in order to identify suitable criteria for evaluating research questions by local stakeholders and developing settlements [85].

In the first stage, a questionnaire was designed in order to collect some information among farmers. A first version of the questionnaire was created and evaluated by a group of experts to detect any structural weaknesses. The group was composed by two University researchers and four rural tourism experts. The final version of the questionnaire, based upon experts' observations, was composed of a total of 24 questions divided into three sections. Section one was about the relationships between farm and rural tourism, section two analyzed the impact of the health emergency on farmhouse facilities in the area, and the third section explored the scenarios expected by farms in the post-pandemic (COVID-19) period. In this stage, 32 out of 70 farmers participated in the survey and showed their interest in the study.

The second stage was carried out through individual semi-structured interviews with selected farmers, using as a basis for discussion the aggregate results emerging from the first round of the survey.

All 32 farmers were interviewed during January/March 2021 on the basis of the main information obtained in the first stage. The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 min, they were recorded, and the interviewers noted the main topics. The collected data and information were equally divided among the authors, who analyzed them separately in order to avoid influencing each other [86] (pp. 41–68). The results of the analysis were then compared, and the main achievements were identified.

Based on the results of the first and second stages, the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) was selected for the third stage, in line with other studies [87–90]. This technique is aimed at expressing shared preferences and/or priorities on the part of the stakeholders, and the decision-making protocol is directed at enhancing the knowledge elements of each actor trying to overcome the conflict–alliance dynamics that are created in the dialectic of the group rather than sharing the analysis. The NGT tries to control these factors by encouraging autonomy and independence of judgment as conditions for remaining centered on the problem [91,92]. It involves two steps which are organized, coordinated, and led by a facilitator [93]. The first step is focused on generating observations from each farmer on the main issues emerged during the individual interviews. In this step, each participant worked individually to produce written comments on sticky notes, then collected and catalogued by the facilitator. In the second step, the facilitator shared with all participants the ideas emerged in the first step, in order to stimulate debate and identify

common and agreed solutions [94,95]. The stakeholders participated actively and provided useful information to define priorities, strategies, and tools for rural tourism development in the investigated area [91]. All 32 farmers involved in the second stage also participated at the third stage, thus eliminating “panel attrition”.

4. Results and Discussion

Thirty-two of the farms operating in the area under observation, i.e., 46% of the members of Coldiretti Savona, took part in the study. The analysis of responses allowed to synthesize 25 items that were included into the SWOT analysis under macro-topics, each referring to four categories: Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities, and Threats. Furthermore, for each category, to make the table more readable, the items were clustered into two groups: “tourism” and “other factors” (please see Table A1 in Appendix A).

The strengths highlighted by the farmers are related to the location and the natural and cultural heritage. Specifically, they evidenced some natural attractions of the west of Liguria as Beigua park, UNESCO Geopark, and Natura 2000 natural sites. Additionally, they identified the rural/cultural heritage of the Ligurian hinterland, located in hilly and mountainous areas with ancient villages.

Rural areas of considerable environmental value (e.g., because of the diffusion of low environmental impact cultivation systems in mountainous and hilly areas) and community-based characteristics, such as agricultural entrepreneurs engaged in land management, are identified as further strengths in addition to landscape value. Last but not least, food and wine heritage (e.g., Taggiasca olives, GI food and wine products) and agricultural quality production (e.g., flowers) are mentioned as relevant aspects to enhance the area.

The Ligurian heritage is indeed an important asset for development and diversification of economic activities related to the agricultural sector and rural tourism (e.g., outdoor): this seems to be a great opportunity for increasing operators’ income in rural areas. Many parts of Liguria are unexplored by tourists and have great potential for outdoor tourism. Altogether, the opportunities identified by the farmers are strictly correlated with the selected strengths.

Rural tourism is considered a promising chance to diversify the classic seaside destination and intercept foreign tourists looking for new destinations in hinterland areas, where tourism is still underdeveloped.

To reach this scope, farmers recognize the relevance of ICT tools, which help with bridging the digital divide, renew interest in agricultural activities among young people, grow consumer sensitivity for products’ links with ethical and territorial aspects, and Mediterranean-style food consumption. As for food and wine heritage, the high quality of local products may enable to set up short supply chain agreements aimed at marketing products in both B2B and B2C, profiting from the notoriety of some agricultural products that are also known abroad, such as geographical indication oils and basil PDO, which is used for the preparation of Ligurian Pesto.

From the tourist point of view, respondents mentioned a set of weaknesses relating to lack of a tourism-specific entrepreneurial culture among companies and difficulties in promoting associations able to increase competitiveness. These limitations are amplified by the lack of cooperation between the agricultural and tourism sectors. Farmers have indeed received support from public organizations in order to develop a common strategic vision concerning the potential of rural tourism, but some critical points in terms of communication occurred (e.g., difficulties in using the main tourism platforms for the promotion of their tourism businesses).

Deficiencies in some services (i.e., cultural, social, and recreational services, transport, ICT network), demographic decrease, low level of digitization, and low propensity of agricultural businesses to create networks are also considered weaknesses.

Identified threats are de facto related to the weaknesses: farmers evidenced a lack of essential public services for the rural population, inability to create a system and synergy actions (e.g., agricultural sector with tourism sector), poor coordination, loss of competi-

tiveness of the Liguria destination, and thus some shortcomings in indispensable elements for the development of a rural tourism destination. Among minor threats are the decrease of European resources for rural development, the risk of abandonment of marginal areas, slow generational turnover in Ligurian farms, environmental fragility of the hinterland area also due to anthropic interventions, and the lack of effective political strategies to guarantee a strong local identity.

Identified priorities, strategies, and tools are reported in Tables 2–4, grouped into several main categories. Priorities to be pursued for a sustainable development of the area were identified, and in this sense, tourism plays an essential role (Table 2). Some aspects concerning the local community are also important, such as collaboration and dialogue among actors.

Table 2. Main priorities indicated by farmers for developing rural tourism in Western Liguria.

Heritage	Tourism	Economy and Society
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Land maintenance to reduce hydrogeological risks Protect the natural landscape of the Ligurian Apennines Preserve the ancient Ligurian villages Preserve cultural and gastronomic traditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design a rural tourist image of the area Develop destination brand Cooperation between rural and seaside tourism Develop sustainable tourism models Improve the quality of tourism products in an experiential key Tourist products for the new generations (Gen Y and Z) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regeneration of rural areas Generational turnover of farmers Management of the fragmentation of land properties Repopulation of small villages in rural areas Improve the digitalization of rural areas Effectively manage any pandemics Develop short food supply chains

Source: internal elaboration.

Table 3. Main strategies identified by farmers for developing rural tourism in Western Liguria.

Community	Tourism	People
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a network between operators Give preference to local suppliers Create lobbies among operators to improve scale economies Act as motivation for local investors Improve infrastructures important for tourists but also for residents Coordinate the public and private sectors Active policies against epidemics and pandemics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competitor analysis to evaluate the positioning of the destination Diversification of tourist offers with the development of rural destinations Satisfy the needs and requirements of tourists, especially those from abroad Land image reputation Enhancement of the Ligurian food and wine heritage Based on the needs of tourists, create and improve the quality of touristic services offered by farms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open-mindedness More collaboration among farmers More collaboration between farmers and other local stakeholders Involve residents and create contacts and interaction between tourists and residents

Source: internal elaboration.

In terms of strategies that might be implemented for developing rural tourism destinations, the need to foster and encourage greater dialogue among farmers and other territorial stakeholders clearly emerged. This would also be beneficial in terms of better promotion/enhancement of the local heritage and rediscovery/diversification of local food production, which emerged as key factors (Table 3).

Various tools were identified by the participants in order to achieve priority goals and implement the strategies (Table 4), in terms of economic incentives and supports, communication initiatives, and tourism-specific actions.

Developing and managing a local area for tourism purposes is a challenge in many regions in the world also due to the highly negative effects the COVID-19 pandemic displayed on the world economy, and in particular on the tourism sector.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic period stressed and aggravated the structural weaknesses already present in the Ligurian hinterland tourist supply chain. In this context, rural tourism has become one of the forms of tourism with positive growth dynamics, primarily able to contribute to the resilience of marginal rural areas through rural regeneration policies within the rural development policy.

Table 4. Most suitable tools identified by farmers to attain the priorities.

Economy	Communication	Tourism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European funds for supporting local farmers • European and national funds to revive the tourism sector due to the pandemic • Local funds by Local Action Groups; local Chamber of Commerce • Use best practices to manage pandemics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media for the management and promotion of rural tourist destinations • Training on how to use social media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market surveys on the main markets (domestic and international) for tourist profiling • Tourism products which may incorporate innovative solutions such as NBS, short food supply chains

Source: internal elaboration.

The findings of this work emphasized the crucial role of farmers in implementing agritourism activities in the Ligurian hinterland. Their opinion was investigated to collect information useful to define operating priorities and related strategies and tools. They evidenced the need to preserve natural and cultural heritage, develop Ligurian hinterland as a tourism destination, and generally, safeguard rural area activities such as local wine and food production and related short food supply chains. These objectives are in line with some Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations [2] focusing on safeguards in terms of natural (e.g., landscape, geopark) and socio-cultural heritage (e.g., economic aspects and demographic issues) and the need for integrating sustainable concepts such as CSR and/or the circular economy into farm activities [31,32]. In this sense, nature-based solutions should be useful to recover anthropic spaces, providing a new environmental destination [15–18] in Ligurian hinterland.

Farmers also highlighted the primary relevance of relationships among local actors for defining a successful rural tourism strategy and related policy. They declared the need to create a local stakeholders' network, both public and private, for improving the rural tourism business [54,55]. Improving infrastructures, involving local investors, and creating stakeholders' organizations with the support of public operators were identified as the main activities to develop for generating a rural tourism destination. These observations are in line with other studies that evidenced the importance of creating local stakeholders' networks [56,64] and improving the relationships among stakeholders also on the basis of their specific characteristics [64,65,72,73]. These objectives can be facilitated through some factors such as network communication and resource sharing [67,68], aspects also identified by the farmers. Furthermore, farmers evidenced the importance of involving residents in order to improve the emotional relationships between tourists and locals, in line with other studies [28–30,42,46].

Lastly, digitalization and ICT tools were indicated as the third issue to consider. Indeed, the farmers evidenced the importance of social media and information technology education among new resources to attract foreign tourism. These requirements are in line with other studies that highlighted the need to improve the knowledge of agricultural entrepreneurs on the use of communication by social media [34,36,38]. Furthermore, management of ICT tools and apps is essential in terms of relationships between rural

operators and tourists (e.g., reservation management, communication, promotion) and also in promotion and development of rural tourism destinations [38–40].

5. Conclusions

The development process of rural tourism in the investigated area is still at an initial phase. Therefore, the building of a local tourism identity is needed to differentiate the Ligurian hinterland tourism from other regional (e.g., Imperia and Genova Provinces) and non-regional rural destinations (e.g., Langhe and Monferrato areas in the adjoining Piedmont region).

This study restated the central role of farmers and presented a mixed and iterative methodology for early involvement of this strategic stakeholder, that could be of inspiration for other rural areas at an early stage of development into rural tourism destinations.

Enhancement of the hinterland heritage (natural and cultural), creation of stakeholders' networks, and digital transformation were the critical issues that emerged during the study. Specifically, farmers stressed the need to strengthen both collaboration among them and relations with other stakeholders in the Province of Savona, in order to improve the appeal of the Savona area as a rural tourist destination. At the same time, the results highlighted the central role respondents believe they have for local development and the need for an active role on the part of local public and private actors to implement a solid rural tourism policy. In this sense, indeed, the study provides a source of information that can contribute to improving the perception of the role of farmers by other local stakeholders and be useful for increasing their knowledge. Specifically, the research output is a tool that trade associations such as Coldiretti can use in relations with local authorities for the definition of activities and the implementation of economic and financial support schemes for rural tourism in the Savona area.

Although the results are comforting and define the start of a collaboration process at the local level, the current study can be considered a first step in a long path aimed at creating a tourist destination. Indeed, some limitations are evident, in terms of actors involved in the study. In this sense, the research is centered only on farmers' perspectives, their attitudes and opinions toward rural tourism, and their potential contributions in the development of the rural touristic destination.

This study aims at contributing to the creation of knowledge in terms of local development, but it should be integrated with further research activities, such as the involvement of other main local stakeholders, the engagement of neighboring areas with similar specificities and peculiarities, and the analysis of potential tourist demand.

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Appendix A

Table A1. SWOT (Analysis).

Strengths	
Tourism	Other Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Naturalistic heritage (Beigua Park, Unesco Geo Park, Natura 2000 sites, protected areas, karst areas, etc.) Rural heritage of the Ligurian hinterland Outdoor tourism Ancient Ligurian villages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development and diversification of economic activities related to agriculture Rural environments of considerable environmental and landscape value Diffusion of low environmental impact cultivation systems in mountainous and hilly rural areas Positive experiences of agricultural entrepreneurs in the field of land maintenance Agricultural production (Taggiasca olives, GI food and wines, flowers, etc.)
Weaknesses	
Tourism	Other Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor cooperation between the agricultural and tourism sectors Lack of a rooted and widespread entrepreneurial culture in the tourism sector Difficulty in promoting forms of association capable of increasing competitiveness Difficulty in promoting rural tourism destinations on major online platforms Little support from public organizations to develop a strategic vision of the potential of rural tourism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced local presence of basic, cultural, and recreational services to the population Distance from centers with such services Transport problems Demographic decrease Low level of digitization Low propensity of farms to set up networks for the exchange of experiences
Opportunities	
Tourism	Other Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rural tourism development Synergies between rural tourism and seaside tourism Discovery of hinterland areas Growth of interest in naturalistic and experiential tourism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunities to fill up the digital divide with the development of ICT Growing attention for agriculture among young people Growing consumer sensitivity to products' links with ethical and territorial aspects, recovery of Mediterranean-type food consumption styles Notoriety of some Ligurian agricultural products also known abroad (Oil, Basil, Pesto) Development of supply chain schemes for local product marketing with restaurants, shops, modern retail, etc.
Threats	
Tourism	Other Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of essential public services for the rural population, which are indispensable for the development of rural tourism Inability to create a system, poor coordination, and sporadic inter-sectoral synergy actions (e.g., the agricultural sector with the tourism sector) Loss of competitiveness of the Liguria destination Identification of Liguria exclusively as a "sea" Region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Risk of cuts to decentralized services in rural areas Risk of laceration of the social cohesion that traditionally characterizes rural areas Presence of demographic challenges in hinterland areas and need to improve basic essential services Decrease of European resources for rural development with the risk of abandonment of marginal territories Effects of COVID-19 on the Ligurian economy Slow generational turnover in Ligurian farms Fragility of the territory also due to anthropic interventions Lack of effective political strategies to guarantee a strong territorial identity

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