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Gastronomic Tourism and Festivals: Perceptions of Corfu Residents †

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Abstract

The subject of this study is gastronomic tourism as a broader concept, specifically focusing on gastronomic festivals and events centered around food, with a focus on the study area, Corfu island. Using a combination of quantitative research and open-ended questions, a questionnaire was developed targeting the permanent residents of the island. The questionnaire was completed by 89 individuals who provided their personal opinions on the gastronomic festivals in the study area and offered ideas for the future planning of similar events. Based on the findings of this research, it is deemed beneficial to implement and promote gastronomic festivals that consider the needs of gastronomic tourists/visitors and local residents. Further research is recommended to identify strategic plans to assist local communities and improve event content, aiming to promote and develop gastronomic tourism.

Keywords: gastronomic tourism; festival; community-based tourism; residents; Corfu island

1. Introduction

The relationship between gastronomy and tourism is quite complex, as food integrates into a travel experience in various ways. More specifically, when a destination offers good cuisine, it also provides enjoyment, an experience, a part of the place's cultural identity, and all these elements result in a significant source of satisfaction for the tourist or visitor, regardless of whether they have a particular interest in gastronomy or not [1]. Gastronomic tourism (often referred to as Culinary Tourism), according to the Ministry of Tourism (2020) and the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) [2], primarily targets travelers and visitors who decide to plan a trip or visit to a place with the main purpose of tasting and experiencing the local cuisine of that specific destination, or even participating in gastronomy-related activities. It concerns all tourists who plan their trip either exclusively for the gastronomy of the place or not. The evolution of festivals has developed since antiquity [3]. In every society, regardless of geographical location or historical period, specific dates and timeframes were designated for joyful celebrations. These celebrations were rooted in the community's religion, local culture—including customs, traditions, and ways of life (whether rural or urban). All these festivities and events laid the groundwork for festivals, which have since evolved into the diverse and multifaceted events of the present day. After all, etymologically, the word "festival" has its root in "feast" or "fiesta", both meaning celebration. Nowadays, the concept of "festival" has broadened considerably, making its

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definition challenging. Festivals today are a subcategory of "events" and may be directly, indirectly, or even not at all related to local culture, but in every instance, they embody the notion of a celebration. The complexity in defining festivals also complicates their typology, although basic categories emerge based on theme, such as community-themed festivals, music festivals, film festivals, arts festivals, and others. In Greece, various gastronomic festivals are organized around the country, e.g., Tinos Food Path, Lesvos Food Fest, Neboti Festival, "Nikolaos Tselementes" Cycladic Gastronomy Festival, Cretan Cuisine Festival, Taste of Athens, and Sani Gourmet Festival. This research aims to investigate and analyze the opinions of Corfu residents regarding gastronomic tourism, more specifically examining gastronomic festivals. Other studies investigate views from potential tourists [4] and specific festivals in Greece (e.g., the Tomato festival at Ioannina [5]; from mythology to gastronomic folklore in Spata [6]).

2. Methods

Corfu is the Ionian Sea's second-largest island. Historically a hub for mass tourism, the island is now actively expanding into diverse alternative tourism forms, including cultural, hiking, agritourism, oleotourism, and ecotourism, supported by its UNESCO-listed Old Town and protected natural areas. This shift makes Corfu an excellent subject for studying gastronomic tourism and its related festivals. The island's distinctive cuisine, influenced by centuries of Venetian, French, and British presence, provides a rich cultural and sensory experience. Corfu's gastronomic festivals serve as vital attractions, promoting local produce, traditional recipes, and authentic hospitality. These events are crucial for enhancing the island's tourism appeal, boosting the local economy, and preserving cultural heritage, demonstrating gastronomy's potential for sustainable tourism development.

The primary research was conducted in the form of an electronic questionnaire, which was created and disseminated via Google Forms. The average completion time for the questionnaire was 5–10 min. The questionnaire was structured in five sections. In the first section, which asked if respondents were permanent residents of the island, everyone answered. Their response determined whether they would continue completing the questionnaire, as only permanent residents were directed to the second section. The second section included questions about the existence of alternative forms of tourism in the study area, their knowledge of gastronomic tourism and gastronomic festivals, and their presence in the region. Only those who had knowledge of gastronomic festivals in the study area and could specifically name them in an open-ended question completed the next section of the questionnaire. These respondents also answered whether they had visited a festival, if they were satisfied with it, and provided suggestions for improvement in another open-ended question. In the fourth section, all respondents were asked to answer on a Likert scale regarding selected motivations for attending gastronomic festivals. These included good infrastructure, local gastronomy, natural climate, local hospitality, and participation of hotel units. Additionally, they were asked whether the combination of gastronomic tourism and gastronomic festivals constituted a positive attraction for the study area. The final section contained questions related to their willingness to see gastronomic festivals take place, their interest in participating in efforts to create them, and their personal ideas for them.

3. Results and Discussion

The majority of residents (80%) are familiar with the concepts of thematic tourism, gastronomic tourism, and festivals. However, 53% of the respondents stated they were unaware of any gastronomic festival in the study area. Among those who were aware and could list specific gastronomic festivals (such as Corfu Food & Wine Festival, Corfu Beer Festival, Sardine Festival, Mushroom Festival, Epirot Association Festival, and Gastronomic

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Weekend in Ag. Sofia's Kantouni), 68% had actually visited them. Furthermore, 58% of these visitors expressed satisfaction with their experience and indicated a willingness to participate in future festival creation.

Regarding personal ideas for the creation of a gastronomic festival, the following are proposed:

- Collaboration between small and/or large businesses to promote local products and flavors, alongside the creation of themed areas within these festivals;
- A street food and beer festival specifically targeting younger demographics, combined with various other activities to attract wider public engagement;
- An amateur cooking competition featuring original recipes based on Corfiot cuisine, culminating in awards for the best dishes;
- Active visitor participation in wine festivals (e.g., in the grape harvest);
- Organization of cooking, winemaking, and olive oil production classes;
- Thematic festivals organized by location, emphasizing the axis of "place–people–products–gastronomy";
- Festivals that combine historical and cultural elements of the region with primary or secondary products and their production sites;
- Gastronomic celebrations rather than strictly gastronomic festivals, such as events in traditional villages with easy access for both locals and foreigners, offering local delicacies and featuring small markets where private individuals and businesses can sell products;
- Creation of suitable venues or the provision of large halls by hotel businesses to host festivals in beautiful and respectable spaces;
- Enhanced advertising to capture the interest of more tourists.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, this research reveals that while Corfu's gastronomic festivals hold strong potential for driving gastronomic tourism, their current public awareness among local residents is notably low, with over half of the surveyed population unaware of their existence. Nevertheless, a significant majority (67.5%) of those aware have attended and expressed high satisfaction, indicating a solid foundation for development. Drawing from both local insights and broader academic implications [7–10], key recommendations for enhancing Corfiot gastronomic festivals emerge. These include diversifying content to appeal to all ages and professionals, actively incorporating community and business ideas in planning, and significantly bolstering promotion through various media.

Crucially, fostering visitor interactivity, integrating local products and cultural heritage (e.g., Corfiot cuisine focus, traditional music), and offering practical workshops (e.g., cooking, olive oil production) are vital for creating more immersive and memorable experiences that can cultivate stronger destination loyalty. This emphasizes the strategic importance of interconnecting gastronomy with the agri-food sector, cultural heritage, and tourism as a holistic approach; this fusion of local cultivation, traditional gastronomy, and cultural diversity creates a rich and authentic experience for visitors, boosting tourism and promoting the sustainable development of the local economy. Furthermore, improving island infrastructure and ensuring free, organized transport will support broader accessibility. Ultimately, by prioritizing participant needs, implementing clear marketing strategies, and emphasizing collaborative efforts between organizers, local businesses, and residents, thereby strengthening community-based tourism, Corfu can transform its gastronomic festivals from niche events into widely recognized, high-quality attractions that serve as powerful drivers for the island's sustainable tourism development and enhance the well-being of both visitors and the local community. It is important to note that this study's

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population was limited to local residents. Therefore, future research should investigate the perceptions and experiences of both local and foreign tourists visiting Corfu's festivals, offering valuable comparative insights. Additionally, similar studies across different festival types could provide broader generalizability to the findings.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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