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A Qualitative Study of Barcelona Food Tours: Representing Gastronomic Heritage Through Urban Culinary Imaginaries

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Abstract

Gastronomy has acquired a central role in contemporary tourism where experiences centered around food are increasingly developed. Food tours have become a prominent urban tourism product due to their ability to connect tourists with local communities. These tours promote the exploration of local gastronomic culture beyond traditional tourist itineraries, encouraging the co-creation of experiences involving guides, producers, restaurateurs, and residents. This study adopts an exploratory comparative design based on ethnographically informed participant observation, conducted during four gastronomic tours based in different neighborhoods of the city of Barcelona between May and June 2026. Observational data were collected regarding food selection, gastronomic explanations, references to tradition and locality, interactions between guides and participants, and the cultural framing of the culinary experience. The analysis reveals that the depth and specificity of gastronomic representation are shaped less by price than by the guide's expertise, territorial rootedness, and the scale of culinary imaginary a tour mobilizes; price operates as a contextual condition rather than as the principal explanatory factor. Whereas experiences that remain within a globally recognizable culinary imaginary tend to trivialize the discourse and representations surrounding local tourism heritage, tours led by specialized and territorially rooted guides more frequently offer articulations of food culture that are deeply embedded in local contexts, foregrounding traditional practices, regional products, and micro-local gastronomic identities.

Keywords: food tourism; food tours; gastronomy; heritage; participant observation; Barcelona

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1. Introduction

Simply by virtue of being inhabited by human beings, the city has always maintained a close relationship with food, serving as the setting in which numerous spaces dedicated to the production, processing, and consumption of food have developed—giving rise to what numerous authors have termed the urban foodscape [1–3]. Against this backdrop, the growing importance of gastronomy in contemporary societies has caused the already well-established presence of food and drink in the city to gain even greater prominence, underscoring the considerable dynamism of the urban foodscape and its responsiveness to the most recent currents of urban transformation. Relatedly, the emergence of cities as key nodes of mobility, labor, and consumption [4,5] has brought new populations into different

urban environments, contributing to the transformation of both these environments and their gastronomic spaces.

The configuration of the modern city as a gastronomic hub thus reflects gastronomy's new centrality for urban populations, as well as the needs of these new residents, for whom gastronomic consumption constitutes one of the pillars of their lifestyle. This has spurred the emergence of urban areas oriented toward what Finkelstein [6] calls foodatainment, generating genuine gastronomic districts geared explicitly toward food and beverage consumption. These shifts in the urban environment, driven by new forms of gastronomic consumption, do not unfold in a vacuum; they carry socio-spatial and symbolic consequences, often bound up with processes of gentrification through which different communities are displaced from their own foodscape [7,8].

Within this broader process of gastronomy-driven urban transformation, tourism emerges as a decisive accelerating factor. The marked growth in tourist flows—particularly pronounced in southern European cities—has destabilized the socioeconomic structure of numerous cities, generating a range of problems that many local administrations have yet to find ways of addressing. Phenomena such as overtourism, stemming from the massive presence of tourists in urban environments [9,10], have driven the touristification of large parts of cities, producing areas of tourism monoculture and a consequent intensification of tensions around issues such as housing access, pollution, and safety [11,12]. Within this context, the urban gastronomic offer has become an increasingly decisive factor in destination choice, with gastronomic tourism standing out as one of the fastest-growing niches within so-called cultural tourism over the past decade [13]. The excessive specialization of certain areas of the city aimed at meeting this demand reveals that the process of touristification has its own gastronomic counterpart, giving rise to the complex phenomenon of urban spatial transformation that various authors have termed foodification [14–16]—a dynamic of spatial and symbolic colonization by activities oriented toward tourist consumption that conditions access to urban space and redefines the ways in which it is used and appropriated [17,18].

From a heritage perspective, gastronomy stands as one of the most vivid expressions of a community's intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage [19] defines it as a body of practices, representations, and knowledge passed down across generations that give communities a sense of identity and continuity—a recognition that materialized in the inscription of the Mediterranean Diet on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity [20], institutionally cementing gastronomy as a social, historical, and territorial practice that goes well beyond its purely nutritional dimension. Along these lines, cuisine can be understood as a set of tangible and intangible elements that contribute to the cultural values and distinctive character of places, constituting an important marker of identity [21] and, more broadly, a territorial symbol expressing a community's rootedness in its natural and cultural surroundings [22]. This link between gastronomy and territory extends to the productive sphere as well, as shown by the recognition of certain forms of peri-urban agriculture as cultural heritage whose gastronomic dimension expresses the intangible heritage of local communities [23].

This cultural centrality of gastronomy has found in tourism a privileged arena for its projection. The UNWTO [24,25] emphasizes that gastronomy has become a core component of the tourist experience and a key source of identity and pride for local communities, constituting an intangible heritage resource of growing touristic value and standing as a top-tier tourist attraction [26]. Tourists visiting destinations with significant cultural heritage, accordingly, show a growing interest in local gastronomy as a means of accessing the place's cultural legacy, with the gastronomic experience figuring as a key dimension in

analyses of destinations tied to culture and heritage [27]. Tourism linked to gastronomic heritage can, moreover, foster a stronger collective heritage awareness, supporting local memory and the construction of a tourist identity rooted in the territory [28].

As noted above, however, this intersection of gastronomy, heritage, and tourism is not free of tensions. The tourist's pursuit of cultural difference coexists with a tendency to seek refuge in the familiar [29], which translates into pressure on destinations to tailor their gastronomic offer to visitor tastes—risking the very loss of authenticity that originally motivated the touristic act [30]. Against this backdrop, it is worth asking what role is played by guided tours, one of the most favored tourist products, whose gastronomic variant—the food tour—has steadily gained ground and followers within the urban tourist offer. The proliferation of this type of tour across different urban settings owes in part to its capacity to bring tourists into contact with the local population, functioning as cultural brokers [31,32] and lending the experience the nuance of authenticity so eagerly sought by today's tourist [33]. Indeed, one of the food tour's central appeals lies in its exploration of local gastronomic culture beyond conventional tourist itineraries, offering a co-created experience involving the guide, producers and restaurateurs, and the local community alike [34–36]. The extent to which this co-creative potential is realised in practice, however, remains an empirical question, and one this study addresses directly.

This article uses the notion of *urban culinary imaginaries* to refer to the shared, simplified repertoires of dishes, products, and images through which a city's food culture is made recognisable and consumable for tourists. Culinary imaginaries differ from heritage narratives in their function. Whereas heritage narratives convey the history, provenance, and cultural meaning of specific food practices, culinary imaginaries consist of widely recognisable references that circulate independently of any particular place and that food tours may either reproduce or challenge. Four nested scales of culinary imaginary were identified across the tours, namely global, Spanish, Catalan, and micro-local. These range from internationally circulating markers of Mediterranean or Spanish cuisine to neighbourhood-specific dishes and venues rooted in local history, such as the *bomba* of Barceloneta. Culinary imaginaries emerge through the interaction of tour operators, guides, participating businesses, and tourists [37], whose expectations shape the design and performance of the tours. Against this background, the analysis examines how food tours mobilise culinary imaginaries at different scales and under what conditions they move beyond reproducing global and Spanish imaginaries to articulate territorially grounded, micro-local heritage narratives. The distinction between Catalan and broader Spanish culinary references mobilized throughout this article draws on existing scholarship on food and national identity in Catalonia [38], which documents how specific products, dishes, and practices have historically been constructed as markers of Catalan cultural distinctiveness. This literature underpins our treatment of the Catalan/Spanish boundary not as an objective classification but as a culturally and historically situated one.

Barcelona constitutes one of the leading urban tourism destinations in Europe [39] and represents a paradigmatic case for examining the relationships between tourism, gastronomy, and urban transformation. According to data from the Observatori del Turisme a Barcelona [40], in 2025 the city received 16 million visitors, more than 80% of whom were international tourists, consolidating a sustained growth trajectory. Furthermore, the city shows a marked gastronomic identity, encompassing a range of dedicated spaces such as an extensive network of municipal markets and a number of historic businesses, which results in roughly half of tourist expenditure being concentrated on food and beverage consumption [41]. Within this context, areas such as *Vila de Gràcia*, in the *Gràcia* district, and *Sant Pere, Santa Caterina i la Ribera* (hereafter *El Born*), located in the district of *Ciutat Vella*, constitute paradigmatic cases within the Catalan capital, extensively studied by scholars

on account of their complex processes of touristification, in which new residents, spaces, and narratives coexist [11,42,43].

While various aspects of tourism in these areas have been the object of previous scholarly attention, given the centrality of gastronomy within the city, the present study focuses on the way in which the tourism industry engages with the gastronomic heritage of these Barcelona neighborhoods. In this regard, food tours constitute a privileged lens through which the tourism discourse surrounding the city's gastronomic heritage can be analyzed, allowing for an understanding of how this heritage is represented and which elements primarily structure and promote that discourse [44,45]. To this end, four sessions of participant observation were conducted, two in each of the selected study areas, covering food tours of different typologies, with the aim of obtaining a diversity of discourses suitable for subsequent analysis. The main findings reveal a significant gradient—shaped less by price than by the guide's expertise and rootedness—between standardized food tours that reproduce a decontextualized and globally recognizable culinary imaginary, and premium tours that articulate more territorially grounded narratives connecting food, place, and identity.

2. Materials and Methods

Building on the objectives outlined above, this study adopts an exploratory comparative design based on ethnographically participant observation to examine how local gastronomy and culinary heritage are represented within urban food tours in Barcelona. This approach was chosen as it constitutes one of the most fundamental qualitative methods of social inquiry [46] and a remarkably effective interpretive tool, demonstrating its versatility in offering detailed and contextualized understandings of multiple sociocultural dimensions, including within tourism studies [47]. Ethnography has, in fact, been increasingly applied to analyze how spaces, practices, and meanings are constructed in tourism settings [48], and in relation to gastronomic tourism specifically, numerous contributions have examined how food heritage is represented, consumed, and mediated through tourism experiences [49,50]. Given that food tours are a tourism product through which participants experience a destination's culture and heritage via its local food culture and dining customs [32], participant observation was employed to examine how local culinary heritage is constructed and communicated.

The study focused on four food tours operating in Barcelona, selected during a preparatory phase carried out between February and April 2026, in which the researchers identified, compared, and selected the food tours to be included in the research. The empirical observations analysed in this article were conducted between May and the end of June 2026. Tours were selected through purposive sampling rather than through an exhaustive census of the available offer. Drawing on prior familiarity with the local gastronomic tourism sector and on an exploratory search of two online platforms (Viator and Freetour.com), the researchers identified tours that met three predefined criteria: (a) variation in pricing, including low-cost, medium-priced, and high-end options; (b) a walking tour format involving multiple stops across well-known tourist neighbourhoods; and (c) explicit marketing of the experience as centred on local gastronomy. To preserve operator anonymity, individual providers are not identified in this article. The main characteristics of the selected tours are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Main characteristics of the selected food tours.

Tour	Neighborhood	Observation Period	Time of Day	Duration	Stops	Group Size (Incl. Researchers)	Language	Provider Type	Food/Drink Included	Price Band
Tour 1	*El Born (Barri Gòtic, El Born)*	Early May 2026	Morning	2.5 h	11	10	EN	Independent, free-tour model	Yes	Free (voluntary contribution)
Tour 2	*El Born (El Born, La Barceloneta)*	Mid May 2026	Morning	4 h	8	3	EN	Food Tour Company	Yes	Mid-range (€70–90)
Tour 3	*Vila de Gràcia*	Late May 2026	Morning	4 h	5	2	EN	Food Tour Company	Yes	Mid-range (€70–90)
Tour 4	*Vila de Gràcia*	Early June 2026	Morning	5.5 h	9	3	EN	Food Tour Company	Yes	Premium (€130–150)

Note. Price band refers to the public price per participant at the time of tour selection. Tour 3 was marketed by its operator as a 'premium' private experience on account of its exclusive, small-group format, despite its price falling within the same band as Tour 2. Elaboration: authors.

These criteria ensured sufficient diversity within the sample to enable a comparative analysis of how local gastronomic heritage is represented across different tourism products and market segments. The final sample included one free tour based on voluntary contributions (with a suggested minimum payment of ten euros per person), designed to introduce visitors to local gastronomy (tour 1); two medium-priced tours focused on Catalan cuisine, one of which incorporated a vegetarian perspective (tours 2 and 3); and one high-end tour emphasizing slow food practices and locally sourced products (tour 4).

The tours took place in the neighborhoods of *Vila de Gràcia* (*Gràcia* district) and *Sant Pere, Santa Caterina i la Ribera*, also extending into the adjacent neighborhoods of Barri *Gòtic* and *Barceloneta*, both also located in the *Ciutat Vella* district. These two neighborhoods were selected for their centrality in Barcelona's tourism discourse and because, despite significant differences, both possess a strong commercial fabric in which tourist-oriented activities coexist with long-standing local businesses, alongside a particularly diverse range of food-related establishments. This coexistence allows for the examination of contrasting narratives in the construction and representation of the city's gastronomic identity.

Data were collected through participant observation, a technique widely employed in qualitative social research [51,52] that incorporates not only visual perceptions but also those based on hearing, touch, and smell [53]—an aspect particularly relevant when researching gastronomy. Covert participation was adopted after careful consideration of the ethical issues associated with this choice, particularly those related to transparency and informed consent [54,55]. Both authors jointly attended all four food tours as covert participant observers, independently recording field notes that were subsequently compared and jointly discussed to ensure a consistent and comprehensive observational record. This approach allowed the researchers to achieve full immersion in the field under the same conditions as the other participants; by not revealing the researchers' identity as an observer, it also prevented tour guides from feeling compelled to alter aspects of their work simply because they were aware of being observed. The authors further considered that personal or sensitive data were not necessary, as the investigation focused on the narrative dimension of the tours rather than on individual participants; accordingly, no personal information was recorded, and no audio recordings were made during the tours.

The observation focused on several dimensions of the food tour experience, including the selection of food and beverages, the gastronomic explanations provided by the guide, the narratives associated with the neighborhoods visited, the interpretation of local products and their relationship with the territory, the interactions between guides and participants, and the presence of historical contextualization related to both the food consumed and the establishments visited. These dimensions were documented through two complementary instruments: field notes, systematically recorded in a field diary throughout the research process to capture immediate observations and to document in detail the social and interactional processes taking place during the tours [56]. As no audio recordings were made, quotations from guides reported in this article are reconstructed from these field notes rather than verbatim transcriptions, and should be read as close paraphrases capturing the substance and phrasing of what was said rather than exact transcripts. In addition, photographs were taken as part of the ethnographic fieldwork [57,58] of food presentations, menus, commercial establishments, aesthetic features, and other material elements associated with the tours.

All empirical material collected during the fieldwork was subsequently reviewed and coded into categories through qualitative content analysis [59], following a hybrid deductive–inductive coding strategy. A preliminary coding frame was derived from the theoretical literature on food tourism, heritage representation, and the relationship between food and territory, and was operationalised as a common structured observation grid

applied identically to all four tours. This grid organised the raw material into recurrent analytical dimensions—the representation of Catalan identity through food [38], the guide's narrative strategies, the spatial context and selected commercial spaces, the relationship between products and the territory [60], and the interaction established between the guide and participants—thereby ensuring comparability across cases. Within this deductive frame, additional codes were allowed to emerge inductively from the material (for instance, "functional folklorisation", "authenticity as performance", "the neighbourhood as narrative stage", and "product origin as structural narrative"), and were subsequently aggregated into the three overarching themes presented below (See Table 2). Specifically, the initial dimension concerning Catalan identity through food was subsumed, together with the emergent codes on authenticity and folklorisation, under the broader theme of heritage representation and authenticity; the dimensions relating to narrative strategies and spatial context converged into the discursive structure of the tours; and those concerning product–territory relations and guide–participant interaction were consolidated under the role of the guide.

Table 2. Coding framework: deductive and inductive codes with illustrative field-note examples.

Code	Origin	Examples from the Field Notes
Representation of Catalan identity through food	Deductive	"the last typically Catalan thing" (*ratafia*); *butifarra* called "the most important sausage in the region"; *mongetes de Santa Pau* and *botifarra* de ou explained by origin and season.
Guide's narrative strategies	Deductive	"not frozen *churros* like in tourist traps"; historical account of *El Born* street names; guide unable to explain the *tortilla* beyond "a big omelette".
Spatial context and commercial spaces	Deductive	*Mercat de Santa Caterina* as "what the locals eat"; independence of *Gràcia* before annexation; venues treated as mere stops on the itinerary.
Product–territory relationship	Deductive	*Calçots* from *Valls*, artichokes from *El Prat*, Arbequina oil; olive-oil tasting by designation of origin; no reference to fresh produce or local agriculture (Tours 1 and 3).
Guide–participant interaction	Deductive	Live demonstration of the *porrón* and *calçots* (Tour 4); guide not eating with the group (Tour 3); vendors greeting the guide by name (Tour 2).
Standardised itinerary	Inductive	"next stop" pacing; rapid tastings in chain shops; identical mainstream products across otherwise local venues.
Staged/superficial authenticity	Inductive	"hidden gem"; "authentic place, no frozen *churros*"; products labelled "typical" with no further explanation.
Commercial hybridisation/folklorisation	Inductive	*Butifarra* flavoured with Coca-Cola (Tour 1); churros as dessert (Tour 4); paella as highlight despite not being local.
Product origin as structural narrative	Inductive	Each product located geographically and culturally, not just named (Tours 2 and 4); comparison of Spanish vs. Catalan cheeses and oils.
Neighbourhood as narrative stage	Inductive	*Gràcia* as "a village within the city"; modernist façades and Catalan spoken in the streets integrated into the story (Tour 4).
Linguistic and territorial rootedness	Inductive	Guide fluent in Catalan/Spanish (Tour 2) vs. mispronouncing dish names, new in the city (Tour 3).
Conviviality and trust	Inductive	Guide sharing food and drink with the group (Tours 2 and 4); pre-existing bond with vendors; guide as detached "waiter" (Tour 3).

Elaboration: authors.

Coding was carried out manually and collaboratively by the two authors who conducted the fieldwork. Each author first coded the field material independently; codes and their aggregation into themes were then compared and discussed until consensus was reached, with discrepancies resolved through joint discussion rather than through the calculation of an inter-coder reliability coefficient, which is of limited relevance in an interpretive study of this scale. Throughout the analysis, the descriptive observational record (documenting what was said, served, and done at each stop) was deliberately kept distinct from the authors' interpretive commentary, which was recorded separately as analytical memos for each tour; this separation was designed to keep observation and interpretation traceable and mutually distinguishable. Cases that ran counter to the emerging pattern were actively retained rather than smoothed over: Tours 2 and 4, in particular, functioned as negative cases with respect to any assumption that the food-tour format as such trivialises culinary heritage, since both produced territorially grounded narratives despite operating in heavily touristified areas.

Regarding researchers' positionality, the two authors who conducted the fieldwork occupied complementary positions. One is a long-term resident of Barcelona, competent in Catalan and Spanish and familiar with local culinary traditions, mealtimes, and seasonal products; this situated knowledge informed judgements about whether particular practices were locally coherent or anomalous. The other approached the field from outside the local context, without competence in Catalan, but with a research background in food tourism and foodification that provided the analytical framing. All four tours were conducted in English, so the guides' narratives were fully accessible to both authors, while Catalan and Spanish appeared mainly in the guides' interactions with local actors. As covert participants, the authors took part under the same conditions as other tourists and did not intervene in or steer the guides' discourse.

A final clarification concerns the analytical categories used in this study. Terms such as "Catalan", "Spanish", "traditional", "seasonal", "authentic", "hybridized", and "tourist-oriented" are not treated as objective properties of the foods analyzed, but as relational and contested categories mobilized by the actors involved in the tours. The analysis does not seek to determine whether a given food is "authentically Catalan" or not; rather, it examines the authentication strategies through which guides construct products as local, traditional, or authentic, and the extent to which these representations are connected to explicit references to territory, provenance, and seasonality. Accordingly, references to tours as territorially grounded or detached from place refer exclusively to the presence or absence of such elements in the guides' narratives and should not be understood as evaluations of the cultural legitimacy of the foods presented.

3. Results

Following the process of the above-mentioned coding process, three thematic categories were identified: the discursive structure of the tours, heritage representations and authenticity, and the role of the guide. A cross-case comparison of the four tours across the main analytical dimensions is summarized in Table 3; the following subsections develop these findings in turn.

Table 3. Cross-case comparison of the four food tours across the main analytical dimensions.

Dimension	Tour 1	Tour 2	Tour 3	Tour 4
Culinary imaginary (scale)	Global/Spanish	Spanish opening to Catalan	Spanish, despite local venues	Catalan/micro-local
Product selection	Internationally recognizable emblems (nougat, ham, churros)	Mixed, with explicit origin	Mainstream, detached from venues	Territorially anchored, seasonal

Table 3. *Cont.*

Dimension	Tour 1	Tour 2	Tour 3	Tour 4
Contextualization	Minimal, promotional	Detailed, historical	Sporadic, superficial	Dense, historical and spatial
Guide's competence (knowledge, languages, rootedness)	Professional but standardized; fluent in Spanish	High; fluent in Catalan/Spanish; long local trajectory	Limited; weak in local languages; recently arrived	High gastronomic knowledge; long local embedding despite non-native, non-Catalan-speaking profile
Relational embeddedness with vendors	Absent	Strong, pre-existing	Absent	Present
Conviviality (guide shares table)	No	Partial	No	Yes
Authentication mode	Staged	Cool	Weak/undermined	Cool + hot
Trans-regional/tourist-oriented elements	Pervasive	Paella (concession to demand)	Mainstream Spanish default	Gildas, churros (residual)

Note. Tour labels follow the pricing and neighborhood categories introduced in Table 1. "Authentication mode" draws on the hot/cool distinction of Cohen & Cohen [61,62] and the notion of staged authenticity of MacCannell [62]. The dimensions summarized here are developed in the following subsections. Elaboration: authors.

3.1. The Discursive Structure of the Tours

Although common elements were found in all four tours, the discursive structure diverged considerably among them. Tour 1 (the free tour), which covered the *Barri Gòtic* and *El Born*, and the vegetarian tour (tour 3) through *Vila de Gràcia* shared the characteristic of being organized as a series of compulsory commercial stops, a route constructed specifically for an audience visiting the city or country for the first time and/or entirely unfamiliar with Spanish and Catalan culinary culture. Tour 1, despite the guide's professional experience, was characterized by a standardized itinerary with rapid visits that included tastings in chain establishments or businesses selling internationally recognized food products and heavily frequented by tourists: nougat shops, cured ham stores, churros shops, and traditional markets. These experiences were accompanied by generic historical and territorial references, which served merely as an introduction for the tourist audience present, with scarcely any reference to their relationship with the neighborhood. In terms of the scales introduced above, Tour 1 operated almost entirely within a global and Spanish culinary imaginary, mobilizing internationally recognizable emblems of "Spanishness" rather than any territorially specific Catalan or micro-local reference.

In tour 3 (the vegetarian tour of *Vila de Gràcia*), the discursive structure proved even more fragmented. A paradox emerged here: although the tour included establishments that were less tourist-oriented and more deeply rooted in local life, the gastronomic offer was framed with little explicit reference to Catalan culinary traditions and with scarce contextualization of the venues, products, or local setting. Paradoxically, despite visiting locally rooted venues, the tour remained confined to a Spanish imaginary, failing to reach either the Catalan or the micro-local scale that its choice of establishments might have afforded.

By contrast, the remaining two tours (tour 2 and tour 4) offered a considerably more coherent and structured discursive framework. In tour 2 (the *Born* and *Barceloneta* tour), participants were introduced to some of the best-known generic elements of Spanish cuisine, such as cured ham (*ibérico*), cheeses, and *paella*, as well as elements of Catalan cuisine, such as the *bomba de la Barceloneta* (A tapa considered iconic of the Barcelona neighborhood, consisting of a large ball of mashed potato filled with seasoned minced meat and battered and fried until crispy. Served with aioli and brava sauce.), *fuet* (Long, tasty, traditional and very popular Catalan pork sausage.) and *pa amb tomàquet* (A basic and emblematic

preparation of Catalan cuisine. Slices of bread (often toasted) rubbed with fresh ripe tomato, then dressed with extra virgin olive oil and salt. It is more of a procedure or culinary preparation than a course itself. It is usually accompanied by other foods such as cheeses, cured meats, *escalivada* (roasted vegetables), etc.). Although this selection partly privileged Spanish products that were more accessible and recognizable to tourists, the guide nonetheless provided precise, contextualized explanations of food-related social practices and of the products' connection to the territory, complemented by historical references to the neighborhoods visited.

Tour 4 (the premium *Vila de Gràcia* tour) was the most strongly focused on Catalan products; apart from a single stop—the *churros* served as dessert—its discursive structure appeared closely connected to the Catalan territory and to the specific history of the *Vila de Gràcia* neighborhood.

These latter two tours, notwithstanding the differences noted above, were far more connected to the spatial context of the visited neighborhoods and clearly more oriented towards interpretation than towards mere transit. Tour 2 combined Spanish references with an opening toward the Catalan and micro-local scales, while Tour 4 operated predominantly at the Catalan and micro-local levels, anchoring products and practices in the specific history of *Vila de Gràcia*.

3.2. Heritage Representation and Authenticity

Both heritage representation and authenticity formed part of the narrative employed by the guides to present the gastronomic offer of the tours and were deeply shaped by the territorial dimension of the visited neighborhoods, as well as by the guide's capacity to connect food, place, and cultural meaning.

Tour 1 (the free tour) was characterized by visits to establishments where tourists consume the most internationally recognized Spanish foods, such as nougat, cured ham, or *churros*. Within this selection, some local products were also included, although always among the most well-known and mainstream, such as *fuet* or "nougat flavored with *crema catalana*. When mentioned, as they were displayed on the shelves of the visited shops, Catalan products were described superficially, through brief, promotional, and attention-grabbing expressions, as in the case of *ratafia* (a traditional herbal Catalan liqueur) referred to as "the last typically Catalan thing", or *cava* described as "the Spanish sparkling wine". Likewise, *butifarra* was defined as "the most important sausage in the region".

A similarly superficial level of description was applied to places strongly connected to the neighborhood. Mercat de Santa Caterina was presented merely as a place "where the locals eat"; a well-known international patisserie was framed as a "hidden gem"; a *churrería* (*churro* shop), highly popular among tourists, was described as an "authentic place where there are no frozen *churros*, unlike in many tourist traps". The only references to the visited neighborhood were that "*El Born* is the most artistic neighborhood of the city" and that the church of *Santa Maria del Mar*, described as "the church of poor people". The resulting discourse was grounded in a superficial and promotional form of authenticity, in which claims to the local carried more weight than any substantive explanation of how food, place, and heritage were actually connected, and remained unsupported by a solid connection to territorial specificity.

Tour 3 (the vegetarian tour of *Vila de Gràcia*) passes through establishments that are less familiar to tourists, more closely connected to the social life of the neighborhood, frequented by residents, and offering a menu that includes numerous elements of Catalan tradition. Despite these characteristics, the choice of foods moved in the opposite direction from the choice of establishments: participants were instead offered products belonging more to mainstream Spanish cuisine, reducing the venues visited to mere stops on the

guide's itinerary, with no reference made to link their singularity to the history of *Vila de Gràcia*. References, when made while eating, were sporadic and lacking in depth. Dishes such as *tortilla de alcachofa* (artichoke omelet)—readily available during that season—were described in vague, familiar terms, as a simple homemade Spanish dish suitable as a light meal, with no mention at all of the artichoke itself, an ingredient highly valued in Catalonia and widely produced in the peri-urban territory.

Elements such as *pa amb tomàquet*, virtually present on every Catalan table, were presented as "something really popular here, typical of Catalonia", while vermouth, offered at an unusual time of day, was introduced only as a herbal "fake wine" distinct from the Italian variety, without any further specification of what this meant in specific terms. The choice of croquets—introduced merely as crispy balls with a creamy interior—and *pimientos de Padrón* (Padrón peppers, traditionally consumed in Galicia) in one establishment, together with a cheese board featuring only Spanish cheeses unfamiliar to the guide, and a dessert such as *torrija* (a traditional and well known Spanish dessert consisting of a slice of bread soaked in milk or wine, coated in egg, fried in oil and sweetened, frequently with sugar) in another establishment, constructed a tour largely disconnected in terms of explicit territorial referencing from the offer present in the spaces visited. The absence of specific Catalan products from the offer, the complete lack of any mention of fresh produce or local agriculture, and the absence of any explanation of their cultural significance left authenticity largely detached from a territorial narrative. It should be noted, however, that a vegetarian, product-hybrid itinerary of this kind can also be understood as an expression of a cosmopolitan urban foodscape rather than simply as a weaker form of Catalan heritage representation. Since the analytical framework adopted here focuses on the territorial anchoring of food narratives, such itineraries are examined primarily through the extent to which they establish connections with place, provenance, and local practices. The observations reported below therefore concern the coherence and interpretive depth of the guide's mediation, particularly the ability to contextualize the dishes presented, rather than the cultural legitimacy of a vegetarian or cosmopolitan culinary selection.

Spatially, the neighborhood was not incorporated into the narrative at all: neither its squares, nor the layout of its streets, nor its most emblematic buildings or businesses were referenced. No mention was made of the history of the venues, the typical interiors of the bodegas, or the food-related customs of the local population at different times of day. The only reference to the neighborhood was a generic remark about walking through its small streets and "cute bars", with no mention of its squares, layout, or emblematic buildings. These omissions are key to understanding why a solid gastronomic narrative could not be observed in this tour either.

In tour 2 (*Born* tour), authenticity was closely linked to the relationship between product, place, and social practice. The guide emphasized local markets, historic establishments, and neighborhood traditions—for example, by explaining the origins of street names—as markers of a genuine gastronomic culture.

While the tour included some mainstream elements of Spanish tradition, the guide incorporated various elements of Catalan tradition into the route, explaining in detail the geographical origin of each product and highlighting the differences between Spanish and Catalan products. For example, *fuet* was added alongside cured ham; a Catalan goat cheese alongside Manchego cheese; and Arbequina olives—usually made in the Lleida area—alongside other olive varieties.

Particular attention was paid to emblematic establishments that form part of the city's history and which, despite being in a touristified neighborhood, continue to produce Catalan sweets such as *coca dolça* (a traditional Catalan dessert), whose history the guide recounted while demonstrating its preparation live. In the case of *la bomba de la Barceloneta*,

details regarding the history of urban transformations in the Barceloneta neighborhood over the past fifty years were also provided. The guide, a local resident with a deep knowledge of the city, constructed a layered narrative that combined neighborhood history, Catalan gastronomic culture, local identity, and an implicit critique of touristification. References to the touristification of El *Born* were not anecdotal but structural: the guide explained how this part of the city had changed and why certain establishments had managed to resist. The expression "hidden gem" was used not to evoke a magical aura around places not yet discovered by tourists, but rather to designate establishments with a distinct identity and a local clientele. However, the inclusion of dishes that form part of the city's tourist-gastronomic imaginary—such as *paella* or nougat—or products such as Padrón peppers or fried eggplants, which are neither seasonal nor strictly typical of Barcelona, revealed a partial dependence on the clichés of the tourist market, reflecting a broader marketing logic and pointing to a limitation in the coherent application of the principles of seasonality and proximity. Even so, in the case of paella, the guide distanced herself from the proposal put forward by the tour operator for whom she works, explaining that she would have preferred a more local dish, such as seafood *fideuà* (A seafood dish of Valencian origin. It is prepared and served like paella, but with pasta noodles instead of rice.), instead.

Tour 4 (the *Vila de Gràcia* tour) proved to be the most comprehensive in terms of territorial anchoring expressed through food, and authenticity was successfully linked to everyday local life. All the tour's stops were really connected to the neighborhood through a route of venues strongly representative of the local fabric (bodegas and emblematic shops, among others), and meals respected the local mealtime schedule. The food offered, linked to its territory of production and to its cultural significance, also included live demonstrations of Catalan traditions, such as having *esmorzar de forquilla* (literally "fork breakfast", it consists of a hearty, more or less late breakfast including hot spoon dishes or traditional stews) for breakfast, drinking from a *porrón* (traditional glass container, with a wide base and an elongated spout, designed for drinking wine by pouring) or eating *calçots* (a variety of tender, elongated onion with a slightly sweet flavor, very popular in Catalan cuisine. They are only eaten in season (winter season and the beginning of spring), eaten by hand and served with calçot sauce) grilled over embers while wearing a bib and plastic gloves.

The *esmorzar de forquilla* reflected the strong local tradition of pork and legumes; the cured meat tasting reflected seasonality through the inclusion of *botifarra de ou* (literally: "egg sausage"); the *vermouth with gildas* (a San Sebastián-style skewer made with pickled chili pepper, anchovy, and green olive) was situated within the appropriate time of day; the chocolate bonbons were offered in a patisserie with a century of history; and the tasting of different varieties of Catalan olive oil (arbequina) was conducted in comparison with other Spanish olive oils. These examples show that products were, for the most part, presented with explicit territorial anchoring rather than through the commercial hybridization seen in Tour 1. Even so, the tour was not free of trans-regional elements: the *gildas*, of Basque origin, and the closing *churros* both point to a culinary repertoire that exceeds any strictly Catalan frame. Rather than undermining the analysis, this confirms that even the most territorially grounded tour negotiates authenticity by combining local anchoring with trans-regional and tourist-oriented references.

Aside from this final choice, the narrative was oriented towards immersing tourists in Catalan food culture and toward making the neighborhood its spatial site of representation. The characteristics of the neighborhood—described as "a village within the city"—including its narrow streets, modernist palaces, a commercial fabric not yet entirely oriented towards rapid, tourist-driven consumption, and the presence of the Catalan language in the streets

and in the establishments visited, constituted an ideal framework for this narrative centered on the valorization of local food.

The tour was guided by a slow food logic, in which the product, its relationship with the territory, and the commercial landscape constituted the key elements of this construction. The difference in price, justified by these factors, also reflected a qualitative difference in the narrative framework: the guide skillfully constructed a relationship between product, territory, and culture without reducing the neighborhood to mere decoration. The *Vila de Gràcia* neighborhood's urban and social characteristics allowed this narrative to be framed effectively. However, precisely because of this, there is a risk that *Vila de Gràcia* might represent an artificially constructed "authentic" place, in which tourists with greater purchasing power could experience an ad hoc, constructed local dimension of the neighborhood without considering the changes occurring in its foodscape. The tour distinguished itself from all the others through its almost total lack of dependence on "symbol dishes" present in the city's tourist imaginary—with the exception of churros—investing instead, not without risk, in lesser-known dishes of Catalan tradition, strongly connected to territory and seasonality.

3.3. The Role of the Guide

The role of the guide proved essential to the success of the tours, emerging as the principal mediator between food, space, and meaning. In what follows, "expertise" refers not to verified professional qualification—which the covert design did not allow us to ascertain—but to observed performance during the tour: the guide's demonstrated knowledge of products and their provenance, fluency in the local languages, length of residence in the city, and pre-existing relationships with the establishments visited. These dimensions are analytically distinct and did not always coincide. In tour 2 and tour 4, the guide played an active interpretative role, explaining the origin of each product, its cultural significance, and its relationship to the culinary traditions of both Catalonia and Spain. In tour 2, the visit to *Mercat de Santa Caterina* was accompanied by three tastings during which the guide explained the different varieties of *jamón*, the importance of *fuet* as a "representative Catalan cured sausage," the existence of several DOP olive oils from the region, and details about certain Catalan goat cheeses produced in the Garrotxa area, compared with *Manchego* DOP cheese. In tour 4, the significance of the *Mercat de la Llibertat* was explained in historical terms, in relation to the former independence of the *Gràcia* district prior to its annexation to the city of Barcelona; during the visit, the guide also highlighted the provenance and seasonality of various foods, such as *calçots*, *Mongers de Santa Pau* (a variety of beans), and the importance of businesses such as *bacallaneries* (salt cod shops) and legume specialists (*llegums cuits*).

In both cases, the guides also encouraged interaction with participants, answering questions about food or the city's history, and articulating a critical stance toward the dynamics of touristification present in the city, as in the case of tour 2. In this sense, the guide functioned as a cultural translator, something that was absent in Tour 1 and tour 3 where historical and relational connection between food and the places of transit and consumption were not present.

A further element worth highlighting was the convivial dimension, which was marked by notable differences across the tours. In tour 2, the guide demonstrated in real time how to prepare vermouth, explaining how to add soda using a traditional siphon-style soda bottle characteristic of these establishments; in tour 4, the guide showed how to drink wine from the *porrón*, holding the vessel aloft and letting the stream of wine flow without touching the lips, encouraging participants to try it themselves, and then guided the tasting of *calçots*, wearing a bib, explaining how to hold them by the charred outer layer with a hand protected by a plastic glove before dipping them into romesco sauce. In both

cases, the guide did not merely narrate Catalan traditions but shared them physically with participants, eating and drinking alongside them, generating an environment of intimacy and trust that reinforced the experiential and relational character of the tour.

In tour 3, the guide did not eat or drink with the group at any point. In the absence of commensality, the interaction remained confined to the mechanics of ordering and tasting, and the tour unfolded as a predefined itinerary of externally established stages to be followed rather than as an experience of commensality built together with the guide. In tour 1, this type of interaction was likewise absent, with the guide limiting themselves, at each stop, to quickly illustrating the products to be tasted. In this case, however, the group size (ten participants, against two or three in the other tours) is likely to have constrained the possibility of commensality and sustained interaction independently of the guide's competence or the tour's price, and should therefore be read as a further factor differentiating Tour 1 from the smaller-group experiences.

The guide's linguistic competence emerged as another observable factor differentiating the tours in terms of the territorial rootedness conveyed through their interactions with local actors. While the guide in tour 2 demonstrated clear territorial rootedness, interacting fluently and naturally in both Catalan and Spanish with various actors throughout the route, the guide in tour 3 showed evident difficulties with the local languages, even mispronouncing the names of the dishes included in the experience and struggling to order certain dishes at different establishments. This limited command of the local languages was compounded by the guide's only recent arrival in the city, in contrast to the considerably longer trajectory of the guides in the other tours, which was reflected in a more superficial and less rooted knowledge of the area visited.

As noted above, this territorial knowledge was particularly visible in tours 2 and 4, where the guides drew on concrete urban symbols and elements of the neighborhood to anchor the gastronomic narrative to place. In tour 2, the guide explained the origin of several street names in *El Born* (*Carrer de Freixures*, *Carrer de les Semoleres*, *Carrer dels Mirallers*), linking them to the artisanal and commercial activities historically carried out there. In tour 4, the guide pointed out the meaning of *Gràcia*'s floral symbol found both at the *Mercat de la Llibertat* and on various balconies throughout the neighborhood, as well as that of a mosaic found in one of *Gràcia*'s squares, integrating these urban elements into the narrative on the neighborhood's identity. By contrast, in tour 1, the guide's role was more limited, oriented more toward keeping the itinerary moving than toward constructing a dense interpretative narrative. Although some explanations were provided, these were frequently brief, repetitive, or confined to a generic touristic framing, without establishing a sustained connection between the foods tasted and the territory or history of the neighborhood.

In tour 3, the guide demonstrated even less control over the cultural framework of the experience showing a limited knowledge of the establishments, the foods, or the neighborhood itself. This interpretive limitation was compounded by the absence of a pre-existing relationship of trust with the merchants visited, in contrast to what was observed in tours 2 and 4, where this relational proximity enabled direct, personally embedded interactions and differentiated access to the neighborhood's commercial fabric.

Taken together, the guide emerged as the principal mediator through which gastronomic heritage acquired meaning for tourists, with their experience, linguistic competence, territorial knowledge, and willingness to share the table with participants standing out as decisive factors shaping the quality of each tour's discursive structure.

4. Discussion

This study has examined how guided food tours in Barcelona mediate the relationship between the urban foodscape and the representation of gastronomic heritage within a context of growing foodification and tourism-driven urban transformation [14,16]. The findings show that food tours function as key experiential devices through which the urban foodscape is selectively interpreted, narrated, and consumed, reinforcing but also reshaping the cultural and symbolic meanings of food in the city [2]. They allow three interrelated dimensions to be identified, namely the construction of authenticity, the mediating role of the guide, and the role of price as a contextual condition on access to gastronomic heritage.

In the tours examined, the scale at which culinary imaginary operates was associated with the mode of authentication deployed. Tour 1, which remained within a global or Spanish imaginary, relied on staged authenticity, presenting recognizable emblems as markers of the local, whereas Tours 2 and 4, which reached the Catalan and micro-local scales, mobilized cool and hot authentication to anchor products in place and practice—with this territorial depth stemming from historical and practice-based narration rather than from the Catalan/Spanish distinction as such. Although authenticity remains a contested and widely debated concept, it has become a central resource in both tourism and gastronomy, where it plays a key role in shaping consumer demand [63]. In the food tours studied, this resource takes different forms, with the predominant logic being the fulfilment of tourists' desire to access the city's gastronomic backstage, particularly in a highly touristified context such as Barcelona.

In the case of Tour 1, the construction of gastronomic authenticity is largely performative and symbolic, with cultural elements reorganized for tourist consumption, creating a "staged authenticity" [62,64] in which the urban foodscape is reduced to a selection of emblematic products such as cured ham, nougat, or churros, deployed as recognizable markers of "Spanishness" and disconnected from local gastronomic culture [21,65]. This construction of authenticity, based on reinforcing the city's touristic-gastronomic imaginary, is reinforced by the guide through an often superficial discourse that contributes to a functional folklorization of regional food products through the abundant use of expressions such as "typical, local, authentic" without connecting them to the territory of production or to local modes of consumption.

By contrast, in the case of the premium tours (Tours 2 and 4), the construction of authenticity is more articulated, offering a more complex and more deeply rooted representation and discourse on local gastronomic culture, placing the origin of the products at the center of the narrative, demonstrating territorialized gastronomic knowledge, and granting a relevant participatory role to the vendors and business owners as subjects with their own history and identity, and not merely as actors in the gastronomic experience. Even so, the authentication processes differ considerably, corresponding to the two processes identified by Cohen & Cohen [61].

In the case of Tour 2, one could speak of a cool authentication process, based on a mediated form of authenticity grounded in product differentiation, historical narration, and processes of urban transformation, aligning with the idea that gastronomic heritage is actively constructed through storytelling and cultural interpretation [65,66]. Nevertheless, although the narrative and the stages of the tour were constructed with a much more deeply rooted territorial and cultural anchoring than in Tour 1, in this case there is also recourse to the reproduction of the local touristic-gastronomic imaginary, including preparations such as paella as highlights of the tour, in a clear nod to international demand, reinforcing the idea that gastronomic experiences are shaped by the dual demand for local specificity and global culinary familiarity [29,67]. Tour 4, for its part, combines both cool and hot

authentication processes, incorporating elements in which food practices are experienced directly through participation in everyday culinary traditions.

Practices such as the *esmorzar de forquilla*, the *calçots*, and shared consumption transform gastronomy into a multisensory and socially valued experience, in line with the arguments that gastronomic tourism becomes more meaningful when it engages the senses and situates visitors within everyday food practices [68,69]. In this case, authenticity is not primarily narrated but performed through practice, seasonality, and spatial immersion within the neighborhood's foodscape [70], a form of staging that arguably functions as a frame adding symbolic value to the main narrative. Finally, in the case of Tour 3, although there is an intention to offer a gastronomic backstage, as will be shown below, the guide's limited mediation substantially weakens the construction of authenticity, offering a narrative largely detached from territorial reference. This weakness should not be read as an inherent limitation of the vegetarian format itself, as Catalan gastronomy includes a substantial vegetarian repertoire (e.g., *escalivada*, *samfaina*, or the *mongetes de Santa Pau* featured in Tour 4), and the tour's reliance on generic Spanish vegetarian dishes instead reflects a curatorial choice in the selection of venues and dishes, for which the guide's own agency within the tour's operator-set itinerary cannot be fully established with the present design.

A second key finding concerns the role of the guide as an experience broker [71] specialized in the gastronomy sector, reinforcing the evidence provided by previous research on intermediaries in tourist experiences [31,32]. The guide does not merely transmit information but actively constructs culinary meaning by selecting, framing, and contextualizing food practices. In this particular context, actively participating in the meal by demonstrating certain local traditions defines the level of mediation between the guide and the narrative. In this sense, differences in linguistic competence, local rootedness, and relational proximity to the context emerge as key elements, significantly affecting the way in which gastronomic heritage is interpreted and experienced.

This capacity for active mediation on the part of the guide, engaging in the transmission of concrete elements of local gastronomic culture, is clearly exemplified by the Tour 4 guide when demonstrating to the participants how wine is drunk from the porrón or how calçots are eaten by hands. These gestures evidence the role of the guide in amplifying the educational and experiential value of the tour, in which, rather than transmitting information, the guide's mediation is oriented toward shaping how participants might interpret and ascribe value to the food practice on offer [72], although the present design—based on observation of the guide's narrative rather than on visitors' responses—does not allow this interpretive effect to be verified directly. As for the value of linguistic competence, the differences found between Tour 2 and Tour 3 clearly exemplify how this aspect can condition the tour experience. Whereas the Tour 2 guide demonstrated a clear territorial rootedness, interacting with various actors during the tour in Catalan and Spanish, the Tour 3 guide showed evident difficulties in speaking the local languages, failing even to pronounce correctly the names of dishes included in the experience.

In the context of gastronomic tours composed of small groups, in which the guide's interaction with the context is highly exposed to the tourist's gaze, this difference based on linguistic competence is likely to bear on the credibility and rootedness a guide can project, a relationship documented in previous research [73,74], although our observational design does not allow us to measure its effect on participants directly. Finally, closely related to the previous point is the guide's relational proximity to the context, that is, the trust embedded in pre-existing social relationships [75] that recent research on gastronomic tourism identifies as a condition for territorially rooted experiences [76], and which, in the case of the tours studied, manifests itself in the pre-existing bond between the guide and the merchants—evident in Tours 2 and 4—a relational capital that is mobilized to

produce interactions grounded in pre-existing relationships and differentiated access to the commercial fabric of the neighborhood. This centrality of the guide, however, qualifies the notion—common in the food-tour literature [34–36] of these experiences as genuinely co-created. While that literature frames the food tour as an experience co-produced by guides, producers, restaurateurs, and residents, in the tours observed the production of culinary meaning was strongly concentrated in the figure of the guide. Vendors and residents entered the narrative largely as objects framed by the guide rather than as co-authors of it, and tourists as its addressees, with comparatively limited agency of their own. Rather than a symmetrical co-creation, what these tours stage is a largely monological mediation, whose territorial depth varies with the guide's demonstrated knowledge and rootedness.

The third finding concerns the role played by price as a factor of distinction and of differentiated access to the representation of gastronomic heritage. The comparison among the tours suggests that access to more meaningful and territorially rooted forms of gastronomic experience is influenced, at least in part, by price. The premium tour (Tour 4) generally offered a larger number of tastings and a higher proportion of products whose provenance was explicitly identified, sourced from long-established businesses, together with more territorially detailed narratives connecting the products to the territory, history, and everyday practices. In this sense, the value of the experience arguably extends beyond consumption itself, potentially including access to forms of knowledge and interpretation that could enrich the gastronomic encounter for participants. Crucially, Tours 2 and 3 were priced identically and shared a comparable duration, yet produced markedly different forms of gastronomic representation. This comparison indicates that price alone does not function as an explanatory variable: it is closely confounded with other factors—including group size and format (Tour 3 was marketed as a private, small-group experience despite its mid-range price), the guide's experience, linguistic competence, length of residence, autonomy from operator scripting, and pre-existing relationships with vendors—that jointly, and more directly, account for the observed differences. The case of Tour 3 illustrates this point clearly: despite its exclusive format and the comparable range of tastings offered, the guide's limited interpretive capacity resulted in a comparatively weak connection between food, heritage, and place. This suggests that the depth of gastronomic representation depends not only on the quality of the products consumed but also on the ability to contextualize and communicate their cultural meaning.

Finally, the study highlights the persistence, to varying degrees across the tours, of a standardized gastronomic canon that shapes both supply and demand in gastronomic tourism and that tends to trivialize and homogenize the offer. Elements such as paella (sold as the final and most important stop on Tour 2), cured ham and nougat (tasted on Tours 1 and 2), croquetas and Padrón peppers (tasted on Tour 3), or churros (tasted on Tours 1 and 4) reinforce the international food imaginaries of Spanish cuisine, since they function as mainstream symbols of this cuisine, reducing Catalan cuisine to a complement, "a touch of the local" in the narrative. This supports previous critiques of culinary standardization in tourist contexts, where a limited repertoire of iconic dishes circulates globally, often displacing regional diversity and reinforcing simplified food identities [29,69]. This tension between territorial anchoring and standardized repertoire is best understood through the cases that depart from the anticipated correspondence between price, guide specialization, and territorial depth—cases which are analytically the most productive. Tour 3, priced identically to Tour 2 yet far weaker in its territorial narrative, severs the assumed link between price and depth. Tour 2, for its part, shows that explicit territorial anchoring and concessions to the tourist imaginary—paella as a highlight—coexist within a single itinerary rather than marking opposite types of tour. And Tour 4 demonstrates that even the most locally grounded experience incorporates trans-regional elements (Basque

gildas, *churros*). Rather than imperfections in an otherwise clean typology, these cases indicate that territorial authentication is never total: it operates by degrees and always in negotiation with the standardized repertoire that the tourist market expects.

5. Conclusions

Beyond the Barcelona case, the study's main conceptual contribution lies in articulating the notion of urban culinary imaginaries operating at nested scales (global, Spanish, Catalan, and micro-local) and in linking the scale at which a tour operates to its mode of authentication. This framework moves beyond treating authenticity as a binary property of tours by showing that the same itinerary can mobilize different scales simultaneously, and that territorial authentication is a matter of degree rather than of kind. In doing so, it offers food-tourism scholarship an analytical vocabulary that connects the well-established literature on authentication [61,62] with the spatial and heritage dimensions of the urban foodscape, rather than treating them separately.

This contribution emerges from an analysis of the role of guided food tours in representing the gastronomic heritage and shaping gastronomic authenticity in the city of Barcelona. Situated within broader processes of foodification and tourism-driven urban transformation [11,14–16], the study shows that food tours are not neutral channels of cultural transmission but rather operate as active producers of culinary meaning, territorial narratives [44,45], and heritage representations.

The comparative analysis of four tours reveals different modes of gastronomic representation across the four cases examined, ranging from symbolic and standardized representations of cuisine to deeply rooted, practice-based gastronomic experiences. Whereas the free tour reproduces decontextualized food imaginaries aligned with global tourist expectations, the premium and neighborhood tours manage—albeit unevenly—to construct richer connections between food, place, and cultural memory in their narratives [65,68].

Nevertheless, the study also demonstrates that authenticity in gastronomic tourism is inherently ambivalent. Even the most immersive experiences are shaped by market logics, selective narratives, and the need to balance local specificity with recognizability. Authenticity must therefore be understood not as a fixed attribute of gastronomic heritage but as a continuously negotiated outcome of tourist encounters [61,62,77].

Price plays a relevant role in the relationship between gastronomic experience and distinction, although the correlation between higher-priced tours and deeper, more meaningful territorial narratives is not automatic. This suggests that the depth of gastronomic representation depends not only on the material quality of the food but also on the ability to interpret and communicate its cultural meaning.

At this point, it is worth avoiding a reading that attributes the observed limitations to the individual responsibility of the guides. The following argument is advanced not as an empirical finding—our design collected no data on contracts, income, working hours, platform commissions, training, or job security—but as a structural interpretation to be tested by future research. Interpretive capacity, territorialized knowledge, and the competence to mediate between the tourist and local culture constitute skilled labor that existing research on tourism employment has shown to be frequently undervalued and precariously organized [78], especially in formats such as the free tour, which is based on tips and devoid of fixed remuneration. The narrative shortcomings observed in some tours may therefore reflect not only deficits of individual competence, but also the way in which tourism labor is organized, which often fails to recognize or adequately remunerate the interpretive work of the guide. From this perspective, which future work would need to substantiate with labor-focused data, the guide could be understood as at once a producer

of the experience and a subject subordinated to the market logics of an industry that tends to cheapen and standardize their work.

Taken together, the article contributes to gastronomic tourism and urban gastronomy studies by reinforcing the idea that urban foodscapes are not merely physical or culinary environments but symbolic and experiential systems in which food, place, and identity are constantly reconfigured [1,2]. Food tours, in this sense, emerge as key mediators in the production of contemporary gastronomic heritage.

This study presents also several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it is based on a small number of cases—four tours—in a single city, which limits the generalizability of the results and calls for caution when extrapolating them to other urban or gastronomic contexts. Second, the analysis relies primarily on the researchers' covert participant observation, which, while allowing the experience to be captured as it is offered to the tourist, does not incorporate the perspectives of the guides themselves, of the merchants, or of the other participants, whose inclusion through interviews would have allowed for a more robust triangulation. Finally, the situated and temporally bounded nature of the fieldwork does not capture the seasonal dimension or the evolution of these practices over time. A further limitation is analytical. By foregrounding territorial rootedness and explicit provenance as markers of interpretive depth, our framework privileges guides with long residence and established local ties, and is less equipped to recognize the value of cosmopolitan, migrant, or thematically specialized (for instance, vegetarian) itineraries that construct culinary meaning on different grounds. Notably, the guide of the most territorially anchored tour (Tour 4) was herself a long-term foreign resident rather than a native, which suggests that it is accumulated local embedding, rather than origin, that our analysis rewards; future research could adopt frameworks better suited to plural and emergent forms of urban food authenticity.

These limitations nonetheless open avenues for future research. Such research could explore in greater depth how different forms of mediation—digital platforms, chefs, market actors—reshape the foodscape experience, or how tourists themselves actively negotiate authenticity during and after gastronomic encounters.

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