

## THE LINKAGE BETWEEN TRADITIONAL FOOD AND LOYALTY OF TOURISTS TO THE RURAL DESTINATIONS<sup>a</sup>

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### Abstract

Gastronomy tourism can be regarded as a travel to a destination for cultural purposes with experiences of unique and traditional foods at the destination. Based on this, the main hypothesis is set. It follows that traditional food is one of the main reasons for loyalty of tourists. The paper is based on empirical research carried out amongst 328 foreign tourists from eight countries who visited six traditional farm houses (Salaši) in rural destination of Vojvodina (Serbia) in August 2015. The purpose of the study is to investigate the role and importance of traditional food in tourist satisfaction and the extent to which traditional food affects positive attitude and loyalty of the tourists about the rural destination. Analysis of the findings revealed that the traditional food is the attribute that most affected the overall rural tourism experience in Vojvodina (Serbia). It is concluded in the paper that traditional food is important contributor to tourist satisfaction and that satisfied tourists are always pleased to return to a destination.

**Key words:** rural tourism, gastronomy tourism, traditional farm houses (Salaši), loyalty.

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## ВЕЗА ИЗМЕЂУ ТРАДИЦИОНАЛНЕ ХРАНЕ И ЛОЈАЛНОСТИ ТУРИСТА ПРЕМА РУРАЛНИМ ДЕСТИНАЦИЈАМА

### Апстракт

Гастрономски туризам представља путовање мотивисано културним разлозима, а поготово потребом посетилаца за јединственим доживљајем и традиционалном храном на одређеној дестинацији. На основу те констатације, постављена је главна хипотеза, а то је да је традиционална храна један од главних разлога лојалности туриста и позитивно утиче на развој руралних дестинација. Истраживање је спроведено на узорку од 328 страних туриста из осам земаља који су у августу 2015. године били гости у шест салаша на простору Војводине. Сврха рада је да се истражи улога и значај традиционалне хране као и обим у коме традиционална храна позитивно утиче на сатисфакцију туриста руралним дестинацијама и њихову лојалност према руралним дестинацијама. Резултати истраживања показују да традиционални специјалитети представљају главне адуте руралних дестинација и оно што највише утиче на целовит доживљај Војводине. Закључак истраживања је да традиционална храна представља један од значајнијих чинилаца који утичу на сатисфакцију туриста, а да се задовољни туристи увек радо враћају на дестинацију.

**Кључне речи:** рурални туризам, гастрономски туризам, салаши, лојалност.

### INTRODUCTION

According to Lawrence et al. (2012), food and gastronomy tourism have many roles to play: a) they are the way of experiencing new cultures. Gastronomy tourism is defined as the activity of exploration and discovery of culture and history through food, which influences the formation of unforgettable experiences (Long, 2004); b) represent significant opportunities for regional development (Hall, C. M., 2005; McBoyle, G., 1996). Food is increasingly being recognized as an important part of the cultural tourism market and particularly a major area of interest for rural regions (Hall & Mitchell, 2001; Hjalager & Richards, 2002), because local foods or food products hold much potential to enhance sustainability in tourism, contribute to the authenticity of the destination, strengthen the local economy and provide for an environmentally friendly infrastructure (Handsuh, 2000); c) and they are a part of the travel experience. Food has been regarded as a vital element of tourism experiences because it can form an important destination image by influencing the tourist's destination choice or decision-making (Ritchie et al., 2011; Lawrence et al., 2012).

Traditional farms (so called *Salaši* - pl. of the word *Salaš*, Hun. *Szállás*) in Vojvodina Province represent unique monuments of ethnology and culture of people who lived in these regions (Gavrić, 1994; Todorović, Bjeljac, 2007). The most famous farms (*Salaši*) in Vojvodina

are located in Bačka, near Sombor, Subotica, Srbobran, Bečej and Čenej. They have been one of important features of lifestyles and work of their residents. The particular way of living in them and economic earning have become characteristic of agriculture of Vojvodina. Observing the number of traditional farms (Salaši) and their residents through history, we can conclude that the production of livestock and agricultural products was very important for supplying the towns in their vicinity.

The authors set the main hypothesis that traditional food is the reason for loyalty of tourists and affects positively the development of a rural destination. Assuming the interest in this form of tourism the authors have investigated the real percentage of satisfaction with some segments of gastronomy tourism that may be crucial for the development of this type of movement. In this sense, the primary goal of the study was to indicate the possible modus how gastronomy tourism affects the selected rural destination in Vojvodina. A survey was used for the purposes of this research, whereby 350 questionnaires were distributed and 328 of them were analyzed. The analysis led to the confirmation of the given hypothesis and lower level hypotheses. The SPSS program, version 17.0, and T-square test were used. In addition to the research data, the authors used the available statistical and other secondary documentation.

#### *LITERATURE REVIEW*

There is no commonly accepted definition of rural tourism since different countries have different criteria for defining a rural area. Vujko and Gajić (2014) presented tourism in rural areas as a key factor of rural areas revitalization process. Petrović et al (2017) suggest that food tourism, agritourism, ecotourism and other types of tourist activities in rural areas are a segment of rural tourism. According to Vujko et al (2016), tourism in rural areas is a key factor of rural areas revitalization process, and food is a key sentence. Locally distinctive food can be important both as a tourism attraction in itself and in helping to shape the image of a destination (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Hall et al. 2003; du Rand & Heath, 2006). According to Cohen and Avieli (2004), the cuisine of tourist destinations is widely advertised. Indeed, few publications on food in tourism mostly deal with it as a significant attraction (Hjalager & Richards 2002). There are hardly any detailed studies of the actual eating practices of tourists, or of the processes of transformation of local culinary establishments in course of the penetration of a locality by tourism (Reynolds 1993; Cohen & Avieli, 2004). Although it is accepted that food is an inextricable element of the tourist experience (Hall et al., 2003; Everett & Aitchison, 2008) and can act as a primary trip motivator (Quan & Wang, 2004), according to Everett and Aitchison (2008), it remains on the fringes of tourism research. The academic literature has concentrated on its role as an economic generator and a marketing tool (Telfer & Wall,

2000; Kneafsey & Ilbery, 2001; Jones & Jenkins, 2002; Okumus *et al.*, 2007) or as a partner to wine tourism (Charters & Ali-Knight, 2000; Everett & Aitchison, 2008). However, recent texts (Hjalager & Richards, 2002; Long, 2004) and a modest selection of papers (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Hall & Mitchell, 2000; Everett & Aitchison, 2008) have marked a new trend in the study of food-motivated tourism.

According to Everett and Aitchison (2008), these enquiries reflect a growing need to transcend traditional disciplinary approaches to food studies through inter-disciplinary approaches connecting psychological, anthropological, ethnological and sociological perspectives together with the studies of food production and agricultural development (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). Many authors state that the gastronomy tourism differs from the agritourism, as it may represent a subset of cultural tourism (the kitchen is a part of the culture), and that agritourism is a subset of rural tourism, but also a subset of gastronomy tourism. Certainly, gastronomy tourism and agritourism are inextricably linked. Similarly, some authors consider wine and beer tourism the subsets of gastronomic tourism (Hall *et al.*, 2003; Wolf, E., 2006), also known as gastronomy tourism (Ignatov, E., Smith, S., 2006; Horng, J.S., Tsai, C.T., 2010) although the differences in the definition of these two types of tourism do exist (Kalenjuk *et al.*, 2011).

Newman and Werbel (1973) define loyal customers as those who re-buy a brand. Loyalty to a tourist destination has been the subject of intense academic debate with respect to its measurement (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Ekinci *et al.*, 2013). Loyalty has been defined and measured differently in the literature on marketing (Olsen, 2007) and tourism destination (Cong, 2016). Another issue for the behavioral loyalty measures in tourism contexts is the determination of an appropriate time frame during which customers may or may not return to a destination (Ekinci *et al.*, 2013; Sirakaya-Turk *et al.*, 2015). Tourism loyalty to a certain destination is the key issue in tourism management because repeated visitors represent an important business opportunity for tourist destinations. Positive word-of-mouth to others in the tourists' place of origin is regarded as an important factor that enhances the image of a destination and tourism flows.

### *METHODOLOGY*

The research was a combination of quantitative methods (statistics and web analysis) and qualitative methods (discussion and written documents). Bibliographic opinion was used in the phase of defining the theoretical framework, and descriptive method for data processing and results interpretation. The sample included 328 participants from eight countries (Slovenia, Russia, Croatia, Italia, the Netherlands, England, Hungary and China). This study is based on modified questionnaire which was primarily conducted in the Black Sea resorts of Romania in August

1997 and implemented by Nield, Kozak & LeGrys (2000). According to Nield, Kozak & LeGrys (2000), the respondents were asked to rate nine attributes (Value for money, Food quality, Number of dishes, Standard of food service, Variety of dishes, Food presentation, Overall traditional meal experience, Speed of service, Attractiveness of surroundings) of food service (on a three-point scale).

A three-point scale although unusual was employed to give unequivocal answers regarding tourists' likes and dislikes. Within the three-point scale the item 'like' refers to the respondents' favorite opinions about the food and beverage and the item 'dislike' to their unfavorable opinions. The item 'neither' was inserted for those who neither liked nor disliked an item. The questionnaire was piloted in the summer of 2015. By applying the appropriate research instruments the survey included variables that primarily concerned the participants' opinions of the linkage between traditional food and loyalty. The variables reflect the opinion of the participants about the food, food service, the attractiveness of surroundings and loyalty.

The collected data were analyzed by employing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program. There are six farms that have been selected for the analysis and they are the following: Dida Hornjakov Salas, located near Sombor, Salas 137 in Čenej, near Novi Sad, Majkin Salas in Palić, Katai Salas from Mali Idoš, Cvejcin Salas in Begeč, and Perkov Salas near Neradin in Fruška Gora National Park. The obtained data were analyzed by appropriate statistical methods which were descriptive and comparative in nature, enabling the explication of the research results and the performance of certain conclusions.

One form of the analysis of the data was the chi-square test (Pearson Chi-Square Test). It was used to determine whether the received (observed) frequency (the responses of participants compared to the origin country) deviated from the frequencies that were expected. This test aimed to check if there is a connection among these groups of participants and the probability of connection. Practice is to always start from the premise that there are certain values of difference in the responses. In order to detect differences in the responses measured on the basis of statistically significant differences in the distribution of the dependent variable in relation to independent one, statistically significant differences are taken for those having  $p < 0.05$ .

The study started from the main hypothesis H: Traditional food is the reason for loyalty of tourists. Certain lower-level hypotheses are set under the main one: h1 – service in the farm house (Salaši) are fast and expeditious; h2 - the food has all the organoleptic qualities; h3 - the traditional food is presented in the right manner; h4 - the environment that surrounds the farm house (Salaši) is attractive and improves the overall impression; h5 – the loyalty is reflected in the recommendations to others and returning to a destination.

### RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Table 1 shows that the largest percentage of the participants came from Slovenia (93 people – 28.4%) and Russia (64 people – 19.5%). The participants from Croatia and Italia were equally represented (44 people – 13.4%), as well as from the Netherlands (24 people – 7.3%), and from England (27 people – 8.2%), and the least came from China (7 people – 2.1%).

The results in the Table 2 show that the highest percentage of participants gave the following “like” answers, which reflects the positive attitudes: they receive the value for money (92.4%) and think that they receive the overall traditional meal experience (99.4%), they think that the food is of excellent quality (98.2%) and the standard of food service too (94.2%), they have the attitude that the number of dishes (98.2%) and variety of dishes (98.5%), are appropriate. From this evidence there are indications that European nationalities participants have “likely” emotions and they are satisfied with almost all parts of their traditional food and food service experiences while on vacation in Vojvodina, Serbia.

*Table 1. Country of origin*

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Croatia	44	13.4%
	Russia	64	19.5%
	Netherlands	24	7.3%
	China	7	2.1%
	Italia	44	13.4%
	Slovenia	93	28.4%
	England	27	8.2%
	Hungary	25	7.6%
	Total	328	100.0%

Early tourism researchers focused on the conceptualization of technical service quality (Cong, 2016) and defined service quality as the quality of opportunities available at a particular destination. This appears to be related to a tourist's quality of experience, feelings and overall food perception. The survey results, which can be seen in the Table 2 (Value for money, Food quality, Standard of food service, Speed of service, Number of dishes and Variety of dishes and) represent the participants' opinion about service and food quality. It is interesting that the vast majority of participants gave positive responses. This therefore leads to the confirmation of the lower-level hypothesis h1 that the service is professional in the traditional farm houses (Salaši).

Mathwick et al. (2001) defined an aesthetic response as a reaction to the symmetry, proportion and unity of a physical object, a work of poetry or a performance (p. 42). Some gastronomy tourism researchers have examined

the role of aesthetics. Charters and Pettigrew (2005) firstly argued that wine tasting is an aesthetic experience because it can invoke pleasurable feelings during the tasting experience, including those related to cognition and emotions, and may involve personal taste and shared values. The survey results, which can be seen in the Table 2 (99.4% of “like“ answers), represent the participants’ opinion about overall traditional meal experience. This therefore leads to the confirmation of the lower-level hypothesis h2 that the food has all the organoleptic qualities.

As gastronomy tourism is gaining importance, food is now a key element in destination marketing strategies (du Rand & Heath, 2006). In food marketing, aesthetic features can assist in selling products. When designing dishes, improving perceived hedonic and aesthetic value can stimulate sensory and affective feelings, and strengthen satisfaction and behavioral intention. The survey results, which can be seen in the Table 2 (Food presentation – 59.1% of “like“ answers), represent the participants’ opinion about food marketing at the rural destination (Salaši), but this therefore leads to only partial confirmation of the lower-level hypothesis h3 that the traditional food is presented in the right manner, because, there were some answers of “dislike“ (16.2%), and “neither“ (24.7%).

Unique and attractive surroundings of traditional farm houses (Salaši) can serve as the key antecedent to a tourist's behavioral intention. Emphasizing attractive cues at traditional farm houses (Salaši) can improve the influence of food quality on the customers' affective response. The participants’ opinion is that they think the environment of traditional farm houses (Salaši) is very attractive (96.3%). All these lead to the confirmation of the lower-level hypothesis h4 that the environment that surrounds the farm house (Salaši) is attractive and improves the overall impression.

It is interesting that 99.4% of the participants have an opinion that they will return to a destination, and 99.4% of the participants (Table 2) will recommend the destination to others. This therefore leads to the confirmation of the lower-level hypothesis h5 that the loyalty is reflected in the recommendations to others and returning to a destination.

In order to detect differences in the responses measured on the basis of the statistically significant differences in the distribution of the dependent variable in relation to the independent one, the results are shown depending on the country of origin of the participants and statistically significant difference is taken for those with  $p < 0.05$ . The comparisons of the responses were made in relation to their country of origin, but this paper presents only responses that showed a certain difference, i.e. where  $p < 0.05$ . After examining the Table 4 it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference in responses, which is  $p = 0.003$ .

Table 2. Answers of the participants

		Value for money?			Total
		Like	Dislike	Neither	
Total	Count	303	14	11	328
	% of Total	92.4%	4.3%	3.4%	
		Food quality?			Total
		Like	Dislike	Neither	
Total	Count	322	-	6	328
	% of Total	98.2%	-	1.8%	
		Number of dishes?			Total
		Like	Dislike	Neither	
Total	Count	322	2	4	328
	% of Total	98.2%	0.6%	1.2%	
		Standard of food service?			Total
		Like	Dislike	Neither	
Total	Count	309	5	14	328
	% of Total	94.2%	1.5%	4.3%	
		Variety of dishes?			Total
		Like	Dislike	Neither	
Total	Count	323	2	3	328
	% of Total	98.5%	0.6%	0.9%	
		Food presentation?			Total
		Like	Dislike	Neither	
Total	Count	194	53	81	328
	% of Total	59.1%	16.2%	24.7%	
		Overall traditional meal experience?			Total
		Like	Dislike	Neither	
Total	Count	326	1	1	328
	% of Total	99.4%	0.3%	0.3%	
		Speed of service?			Total
		Like	Dislike	Neither	
Total	Count	130	135	63	328
	% of Total	39.6%	41.2%	19.2%	
		Attractiveness of surroundings?			Total
		Like	Dislike	Neither	
Total	Count	316	-	12	328
	% of Total	96.3%	-	3.7%	
		Recommendation for others?			Total
		Like	Dislike	Neither	
Total	Count	326	-	2	328
	% of Total	99.4%	-	0.6%	
		I'll be back again?			Total
		Like	Dislike	Neither	
Total	Count	326	-	2	328
	% of Total	99.4%	-	0.6%	

Table 3. Opinion of the participants

		Food presentation?			Total	
		Like	Dislike	Neither		
Country of origin?	Croatia	Count	24	6	14	44
		% of Total	7.3%	1.8%	4.3%	13.4%
	Russia	Count	46	11	7	64
		% of Total	14.0%	3.4%	2.1%	19.5%
	Netherlands	Count	12	4	8	24
		% of Total	3.7%	1.2%	2.4%	7.3%
	China	Count	2	4	1	7
		% of Total	0.6%	1.2%	0.3%	2.1%
	Italia	Count	35	2	7	44
		% of Total	10.7%	0.6%	2.1%	13.4%
	Slovenia	Count	46	19	28	93
		% of Total	14.0%	5.8%	8.5%	28.4%
	England	Count	16	5	6	27
		% of Total	4.9%	1.5%	1.8%	8.2%
	Hungary	Count	13	2	10	25
		% of Total	4.0%	0.6%	3.0%	7.6%
Total		Count	194	53	81	328
		% of Total	59.1%	16.2%	24.7%	100%

Table 4. Pearson Chi-Square Test

Attachment 1.	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test Male	33.242	14	0.003

Gastronomy tourism is a decisive factor in satisfaction, as it produces a lasting memory about the experience lived by a tourist. This leads us to the question: what makes experience in gastronomy tourism of Vojvodina? Each farm is recognizable according to some Vojvodina specialties and data from the Table 2 show that traditional food plays an important role in creating tourist loyalty. Findings from our research show us that tourists' satisfaction most of all leads to loyalty, and in the context of tourist destinations, foreign visitor loyalty remains an important indicator of successful rural destination management. All these confirm the main hypothesis H that traditional food is the reason for loyalty of tourists.

### CONCLUSION

Recent studies have found that food can enhance the identity of destinations because it is strongly related to ways of life, local production, cultural celebration, and heritage (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). During the visit to a destination, tourists have the opportunity to experience the amenities and attractions of the local area, and it is likely that a positive

experience will influence the likelihood of a return visit. Whether a tourist visits rural areas for traditional food, relaxation and fun, to learn, to have an adventure or for personal growth and a sense of identification, he seeks for an experience.

During travel, tourists typically spend approximately 40% of their budgets on food (Boyne, Williams, & Hall, 2002). Gastronomy tourism provides experience such as a direct and indirect participation in the food experience (e.g. cooking traditional dishes, eating the traditional food), but as a form of experience economy, gastronomy tourism must provide completely authentic offer. Otherwise, gastronomy tourism is no long-term sustainable. Therefore, for a tourism destination, it is important to understand which additional elements may influence consumer loyalty. There is no doubt that gastronomy tourism could contribute consumer loyalty. Attractive surroundings, relaxation and fun that tourists experience during a gastronomic route and the social interaction with people of similar interests are the main reasons why they will certainly return to the destination. Satisfaction with the destination leads to customer loyalty and this in turn gives a higher level of intention to repeat the visit.

Vojvodina is traditionally a significant producer of food in the region and Serbia, and can be significant resource of gastronomy tourism. Its geographic location, relief, climate and cultural heritage created many recognizable, authentic dishes and food products. One is certain, rural heritage of Vojvodina must be built upon authenticity and its local- unique food or cuisines can be used as marketing tools to attract more visitors.

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## ВЕЗА ИЗМЕЂУ ТРАДИЦИОНАЛНЕ ХРАНЕ И ЛОЈАЛНОСТИ ТУРИСТА ПРЕМА РУРАЛНИМ ДЕСТИНАЦИЈАМА

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### Резиме

На основу констатације да гастрономски туризам представља путовање мотивисано културним разлозима, а поготово потребом посетилаца за јединственим доживљајем и традиционалном храном на одређеној дестинацији, постављена је главна хипотеза рада, а то је да је традиционална храна један од главних разлога лојалности туриста и позитивно утиче на развој руралних дестинација. Истраживање је спроведено на узорку од 328 страних туриста из осам земаља (Словенија, Русија, Хрватска, Италија, Холандија, Енглеска, Мађарска и Кина) који су у августу 2015. године били гости у шест салаша на простору Војводине. Салашу у Војводини представљају јединствене грађевинске и стамбене објекте који пресликавају традиционалан начин живота и културу становника Војводине. Најпознатији салашу Војводине налазе се у Бачкој, у близини Сомбора, Суботице, Србобрана, Бечеја и Ченеја. Сврха рада била је да се истражи улога и значај традиционалне хране као и обим у коме традиционална храна позитивно утиче на сатисфакцију туриста према руралним дестинацијама и њихову лојалност према руралним дестинацијама. Истраживање је засновано на упитнику који су примарно користили научници Nield, Kozak & LeGrys (2000), испитујући ставове гостију

црноморске обале у Румунији. Од испитаника се тражило да оцене девет атрибута када је услуга хране у питању („вредност за новац“, број гангова, стандарде услуге, разноврсност гангова, презентацију хране, укупно искуство када је храна у питању, брзину услуге и атрактивност окружења).

Поред главне хипотезе, у раду су постављене и потхипотезе које су такође потврђене, а то је да је услуга на салашима брза и експедитивна (h1); да храна има све неопходне органолептичке карактеристике (h2); да окружење у коме су смештени салаша такође доприноси укупном позитивном утиску (h4) и да се лојалност рефлектује кроз препоруке другима и кроз враћање на дестинацију (h5). Једино је потхипотеза, да је храна представљена по највишим стандардима (h3), делимично потврђена, што је пре свега указало на то да је потребно порадити на маркетингу и промоцији, како хране, тако и салаша. Војводина представља веома значајан ресурс када је гастрономски туризам Србије у питању. Да би се привукао што већи број туриста и постигла лојалност код туриста, гастрономски туризам као један од најјачих компаративних предности Војводине, мора бити базиран на аутентичности и разноликости кухиња ових простора, које се као такве могу искористити у пропагандне сврхе и постати веома моћно оруђе за постизање дестинацијске конкурентности. Дакле, закључак истраживања је да традиционална храна свакако представља један од значајнијих чинилаца који утичу на сатисфакцију туриста, а да се задовољни туристи увек радо враћају на дестинацију.