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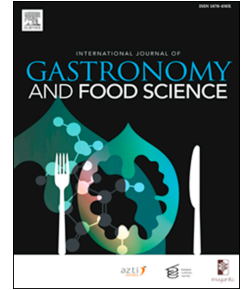
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Culinary destination enchantment: The strategic interplay of local gastronomy in regional tourism development

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## **Culinary destination enchantment:**

# **The strategic interplay of local gastronomy in regional tourism development**

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## Culinary destination enchantment: The strategic interplay of local gastronomy in regional tourism development

(Recuero-Virto & Valilla, 2024)



ELSEVIER

### Research questions ?

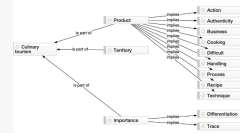
RQ1 - Image Development  
RQ2 - Tourist Motivations  
RQ3 - Risks Impact  
RQ4 - Decision Factors

### Methodology ATLAS.ti

Grounded Theory & Atlas.ti software for in-depth qualitative analysis. Enriched by insights from interviews with 5 culinary experts.

### Results

Word clouds, networks, category frequency.



### Theoretical contributions

Renowned chefs, distinguished restaurants, cognitive, and affective dimensions

### Managerial implications

Cohesive branding, segmented marketing, immersive activities.

### Limitations and Future Research

Regional Focus, Qualitative Emphasis. Future avenues: AI Personalization, Climate Change Impact

Journal Pre-proof

1 **Culinary destination enchantment:**

2 **The strategic interplay of local gastronomy in regional**  
3 **tourism development**

4

5 **ABSTRACT**

6 This study delves into the dynamic realm of tourism research, highlighting the  
7 significance of local cuisine in destination allure. By leveraging regional food for  
8 branding and growth, it enriches visitor experiences while reinforcing regional  
9 identity. Utilizing Grounded Theory and Atlas.ti software, the research explores the  
10 influence of personal motivations, preferences, and risk perceptions on tourists and  
11 food enthusiasts. Through five expert interviews and a thorough literature review, it  
12 uncovers nuanced insights into tourists' attitudes towards culinary tourism. With a  
13 particular focus on the Basque region, it underscores the strategic deployment of  
14 sensory gastronomic experiences for effective place-branding.

15 **Keywords:**

16 food tourism; gastronomy; culinary tourism; place-branding; tourist experience;  
17 Grounded Theory; Basque Country; sensory experiences.

18

19 **1. Introduction**

20 Tourism research has undergone a paradigm shift, highlighting the importance of  
21 local food in enhancing destination appeal (Hsu & Scott, 2020). Destinations  
22 strategically utilize local cuisine for branding and regional development, thereby  
23 enhancing tourists' experiences and regional identity (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2019;  
24 Stone et al., 2021; Tsai & Wang, 2017). Cognitive perceptions significantly  
25 influence a tourist's decision to visit a destination for its food, with personality traits  
26 such as food neophobia moderating the destination image model (Hiamey et al.,  
27 2020; Lai et al., 2019). Cognitive perceptions, particularly food neophobia, play a  
28 significant role in tourists' decisions to explore culinary destinations (Hiamey et al.,  
29 2020; Lai et al., 2019). These perceptions also reflect broader societal shifts, where  
30 formerly exclusive foods become more accessible, reshaping consumption patterns  
31 and culinary discourses. These processes, often referred to as "gourmetisation" or  
32 "food gentrification" reveal the complex interplay between social class,  
33 contemporary capitalism, and culinary practices. They highlight how food  
34 consumption influence identity, food heritage, and collective memory  
35 (Mariano-Juárez et al., 2023). Visitors highly value local cuisine, considering it an  
36 essential part of their travels, and the food service sector plays a significant role in  
37 shaping the overall tourist experience (Su et al., 2018).

38 Within the domain of food tourism, the study acknowledges its substantial impact on  
39 tourists' choices, driven by motivations like cultural immersion and the sensory  
40 pleasure of exploring diverse cuisines (Ellis et al., 2018; Su et al., 2020).  
41 Gastronomic tourism is defined as a purposeful pursuit intertwined with a region's  
42 culture and attractiveness, emphasizing the consumption of local cuisine as a crucial  
43 factor enriching the overall tourist experience (Okumus & Cetin, 2018; Mora et al.,  
44 2021; Rico, 2023).

45 Amid the global pandemic, which has profoundly influenced tourists' perceptions  
46 and behaviours, including local food consumption (Yu et al., 2021), this research  
47 aims to fill gaps in understanding food tourism by delving into the personal  
48 motivations, preferences, and behaviours of tourists and 'foodies' (Hiamey et al.,  
49 2020; Kim et al., 2019; Sánchez-Cañizares et al., 2020). Recognizing the

50 significance of gastronomy in destination selection (Forlani et al., 2022), the study  
51 endeavours to offer comprehensive insights into the evolving dynamics of food  
52 tourism in the post-pandemic era.

53 Focused on the Basque Country, celebrated for its culinary excellence, particularly  
54 the New Basque Cuisine, and strategically utilizing Michelin-starred restaurants  
55 along the historic Camino de Santiago de Compostela, the region's emphasis on  
56 sensory food experiences has crafted a distinctive place-branding strategy,  
57 establishing it as a premier culinary destination (Balderas-Cejudo et al., 2022;  
58 Muñiz-Martinez & Florek, 2023).

59 In addressing this research gap, our aim is to provide a comprehensive, theoretically,  
60 and empirically grounded response to the following research questions (RQs in  
61 advance):

62 RQ1. How is the image of a gastronomic destination developed?

63 RQ2. How does personal motivation influence the decision to embark on a  
64 gastronomic journey?

65 RQ3. How significantly does a risk situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic  
66 affect the decision to embark on a gastronomic journey?

67 RQ4. What specific factors play a crucial role in the decision-making process  
68 when choosing to embark on a gastronomic journey?

69 The article is structured as follows: Section 2 offers a brief review of prior research  
70 and outlines the research gap. In Section 3, the research method is presented,  
71 specifying the study context, data collection, and the Grounded Theory analysis  
72 technique utilizing Atlas.ti software. Subsequently, in Section 4, our findings are  
73 synthesized into a set of propositions describing the resolution for each research  
74 question. Section 5 provides conclusions of the findings and their implications for  
75 scholars, practitioners, and society. Finally, a summary and an outlook on future  
76 research are included. Considering the changing travel landscapes, this  
77 comprehensive approach seeks to reveal the complex interdependencies and  
78 substantially advance knowledge of tourists' attitudes towards food tourism  
79 (Apaolaza et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2021).

## 80 2. Theoretical framing and literature review

### 81 2.1 *Food destination's image.*

82 The construction of a food destination's image is influenced by a multitude of  
83 factors. These elements encompass the tourists' perceptions and assessments of local  
84 cuisine, embracing key aspects such as quality, authenticity, diversity, and appeal  
85 (Yasami et al., 2020). This conceptual framework significantly reverberates through  
86 tourists' motivations, preferences, and the overall quality of their experiences (Choe  
87 & Kim, 2018; de Jong & Varley, 2017; Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019; Tsai  
88 & Wang, 2017).

89 In the context of wine tourism, the destination image is characterized by cognitive  
90 dimensions, which focus on tangible elements such as wine and food experiences,  
91 and affective dimensions, which involve emotional associations such as relaxation  
92 and pleasure (Lai et al., 2019; Seo et al., 2014; Wu & Liang, 2020). The cognitive  
93 image encapsulates beliefs and knowledge concerning destination attributes, while  
94 the affective image plays a crucial role in influencing feelings towards a destination,  
95 acting as a mediating force between cognitive images and behavioral intentions  
96 (Woosnam et al., 2020).

97 Both cognitive and affective images assume pivotal roles in influencing intentions  
98 towards destinations, subsequently impacting various dimensions like tourism  
99 satisfaction, place attachment, and intentions to revisit or recommend a destination  
100 (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Tasci et al., 2021). The attitude towards a particular  
101 behaviour, indicative of an individual's evaluative position, also plays a significant  
102 role in shaping intentions and actual behaviours (Han et al., 2019). A robust  
103 correlation exists between a destination's food perception and tourists' behaviour,  
104 with favourable perceptions contributing to heightened satisfaction and loyalty  
105 (Prayag et al., 2016; Toudert & Bringas-Rábago, 2019; Tsai & Wang, 2017).

106 Notably, a positive impression of local cuisine not only influences intentions to  
107 revisit but also stimulates the sharing of positive word-of-mouth recommendations  
108 (Kim, 2017; Prayag et al., 2016). The positive image of a destination's food  
109 significantly shapes tourists' attitudes and emotional perceptions, fostering a more  
110 favourable attitude and an enhanced affective image (Görür, & Güzeller, 2020).

111 Affective image, reflecting the emotional response during interactions with a  
112 destination, particularly its culinary identity, emerges as a decisive factor in shaping  
113 tourists' comprehensive perceptions and behaviour towards a destination. This  
114 underscores the critical role of gastronomic experiences in fortifying emotional  
115 connections (Lai et al., 2019; Seongseop et al., 2021).

## 116 **2.2 Food tourism motivators.**

117 The study of travel motivations, especially in the context of food tourism, has  
118 garnered considerable attention as researchers aim to elucidate the factors shaping  
119 tourists' preferences. Food tourism is primarily characterized by immersive cultural  
120 experiences, where tourists engage with diverse traditions through food, akin to a  
121 form of "cultural anthropology" (Ellis et al., 2018). This involves a deep  
122 understanding of the local cultural identity shaped by regional foods and culinary  
123 activities, delving into the social, cultural, and historical significance of local  
124 cuisines (Goolaup et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2020). Additionally, tourists who engage  
125 in learning new aspects tend to better appreciate the value of co-creation within food  
126 tourism experiences (Rachão et al., 2020). Such insights not only enrich the tourism  
127 experience but also underscore the vital role that the interplay between territory,  
128 food, and societies plays in fostering sustainable rural development, as exemplified  
129 by initiatives like the chili route in Yahualica Denomination of Origin (De Jesús-  
130 Contreras et al., 2023).

131 The taste of food significantly influences visitors' attitudes toward travel  
132 experiences, with factors such as quality, enjoyment, cooking techniques, and  
133 presentation impacting their perceptions and destination choices (Su et al., 2020;  
134 Kim et al., 2020). This dimension emphasizes the sensorial and hedonic aspects of  
135 the food experience, establishing it as a compelling factor in destination selection.

136 The motivation for food tourism directly shapes attitudes, revealing how inherent  
137 motivations influence perceptions of food-related aspects within a destination.  
138 Agyeiwaah et al. (2019) have demonstrated that motivational factors significantly  
139 influence future behaviours. To comprehend the connection between tourists'  
140 motivation toward food-related experiences and their subsequent attitudes, various  
141 dimensions of value must be explored, including the diverse quality and performance

142 of food events, sensory aspects, and the taste of the food (Kim & Eves, 2012; Kivela  
143 & Crotts, 2006).

### 144 ***2.3 Associated perceived risks of food tourism.***

145 Understanding the perceived risks associated with food tourism is crucial as it  
146 significantly influences consumer decision-making. These risks encompass financial,  
147 performance, psychological, and physiological dimensions (Dash, 2020; Han et al.,  
148 2019). Risk perception, in this context, involves an individual's evaluation of  
149 potential threats or uncertainties linked to travel decisions, impacting attitudes,  
150 behavioral intentions, and predicting the likelihood of travel avoidance (Dash, 2020).  
151 Concurrently, safety in the ambit of food tourism involves various dimensions  
152 contributing to tourists' overall sense of security and well-being throughout their  
153 travel experiences (Seger-Guttmann & Gilboa, 2023; Zou & Meng, 2020).

154 A myriad of risks can be associated with food tourism, including physical,  
155 psychological, financial, and functional/performance concerns. Physical risk pertains  
156 to potential dangers or threats that may compromise physical health or safety during  
157 various activities (Yi et al., 2020). Psychological risk involves the potential for  
158 discomfort, shame, or challenges to self-esteem during travel, impacting attitudes  
159 and mental well-being (Dash, 2020; Han et al., 2019). Financial risk relates to  
160 potential losses or uncertainties concerning the value gained from travel experiences,  
161 significantly influencing consumer behaviour (Han et al., 2019; Dash, 2020; Yi et al.,  
162 2020). Perceived functional/performance risk is associated with the product or  
163 service's inability to meet anticipated standards, influencing consumers' confidence  
164 and attitudes (Koh et al., 2023; Han et al., 2019).

165 Amidst the global pandemic, COVID-19 travel risk has emerged, encompassing  
166 perceived threats and vulnerabilities in the tourism sector that impact economic  
167 stability, employment, and tourist confidence. Fear exacerbated by media  
168 exaggeration significantly affects individuals' sentiments and behaviours during  
169 travel (Dogramadjieva & Terziyska, 2022; Luo & Lam, 2020; Yu et al., 2021).  
170 Conversely, COVID-19 travel safety refers to the implemented measures and  
171 protocols, including health and sanitation standards, playing a crucial role in  
172 ensuring tourists' safety and preventing the spread of the virus.

173 The perception of safety plays a vital role in shaping tourists' attitudes, intentions to  
174 visit, and trust in service providers, particularly in the COVID-19 era. The concept of  
175 travel serenity, reflecting a calm state during travel, is suggested to positively  
176 influence attitudes and perceptions of safety, mitigating fear and anxiety (Apaolaza  
177 et al., 2022; Bae & Chang, 2021). Positive perceptions of travel safety enhance  
178 attitudes and trust toward travel, underscoring the substantial impact of safety  
179 perceptions on behavioral intentions (Apaolaza et al., 2022).

### 180 **3. Methodological approach**

#### 181 **3.1 Study context.**

182 This research is placed in the Basque Country, a region renowned for its culinary  
183 excellence, rendering it a compelling subject for study due to its well-established  
184 reputation within the culinary sphere. The acknowledged quality of Basque  
185 gastronomy and cuisine (Franklin, 2016) has been further enhanced by the  
186 emergence of the New Basque Cuisine, a culinary movement that seamlessly  
187 integrates traditional cooking with the sophistication of Haute cuisine, thereby  
188 elevating the standing of Basque chefs (Balderas-Cejudo et al., 2022).

189 A collaborative initiative among a cohort of innovative chefs in the region, including  
190 Martín Berasategui, Karlos Arguiñano, Pedro Subijana, Arzak (both the father and  
191 daughter), and Andoni Aduriz, aspires to attain culinary perfection by amalgamating  
192 classic high-quality food products with avant-garde techniques. These Michelin-  
193 starred restaurants are predominantly situated along or near the historic cultural route  
194 of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, which is presently experiencing a revival.  
195 Notably, this resurgence is particularly observable in key towns and centres of arts  
196 and cultural tourism along the route, such as San Sebastian and Guernica (Franklin,  
197 2016).

198 The strategic placement of these renowned eateries significantly contributes to the  
199 sensory experience associated with the province, providing a distinctive sense of  
200 location. This sensory-centric approach forms the foundation of a place-branding  
201 strategy that underscores immersive food experiences, positioning the Basque  
202 Country as an alluring destination for tourists, culinary enthusiasts, and individuals  
203 with a profound interest in the scholarly exploration and appreciation of cuisine

204 (Muñiz-Martinez & Florek, 2023).

### 205 **3.2 Data collection design**

206 The data collection process entailed conducting five semi-structured interviews with  
207 culinary experts from February to April 2022. The sample selection is based on  
208 purposive non-probabilistic sampling until theoretical saturation was reached, in this  
209 study within the five interviewees (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Therefore, these experts  
210 were chosen for their knowledge and relevance in marketing and culinary tourism.  
211 These five participants were notified that their contribution would not be anonymous,  
212 emphasizing the importance of acknowledging that their expertise was notorious for  
213 enriching the body of knowledge, as recommended by Gibson and Braun (2009) in  
214 their ethical considerations (see Table 1).

215 [Table 1]

216 The analytical challenge lied in ensuring consistency across diverse interviewees. To  
217 address this, specific guidelines were designed for each participant (see Appendix),  
218 considering the variables influencing perceptions of gastronomic destinations. While  
219 common topics were addressed uniformly (refer to Table 2), distinct areas of interest,  
220 aligned with each interviewee's expertise, were incorporated.

221 [Table 2]

222 Furthermore, an extensive literature review was undertaken to gain insights into the  
223 study area and formulate the four research questions. In line with the approach  
224 advocated by Corbin and Strauss (2015), the literature review played a pivotal role in  
225 immersing the researcher in the data, generating pertinent interview questions, and  
226 offering subjects for consideration throughout the study. This comprehensive review  
227 serves as a valuable instrument in situating the information derived from interviews  
228 and guiding subsequent analyses.

### 229 **3.3 Data analysis technique**

230 The qualitative research in this study aimed to explore culinary tourism and  
231 associated decision-making processes, employing the Grounded Theory  
232 methodology with Atlas.ti version 23.4, following the stages outlined in Table 1

233 (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Miani et al., 2023;  
234 Smit & Scherman, 2021). Grounded Theory has gained prominence in marketing  
235 research for its effectiveness in revealing social processes (Colucci & Pedroni, 2022;  
236 González-Torres et al., 2021; Sokołowska et al., 2022; Webster & Paquette, 2023).

237 [Table 3]

238 Grounded Theory involves constant comparative method and theoretical sampling  
239 across four stages: research design, data collection and classification, data analysis,  
240 and confrontation with literature (Aldamman et al., 2024). The iterative process  
241 integrates data, literature, and emerging categories until theoretical saturation is  
242 achieved (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Interview data is  
243 analysed with open, axial, and selective coding, facilitated by Atlas.ti, aligning  
244 seamlessly with Grounded Theory methodology (Miani et al., 2023; Salinas &  
245 Garrido, 2022). The study focuses on building theoretical frameworks and exploring  
246 interrelations to address the four research questions outlined for this study (Colucci  
247 & Pedroni, 2022).

248 All interviews were conducted in Spanish, translated into English, and analysed with  
249 Atlas.ti, which is a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis software  
250 (González-Torres et al., 2021). This software streamlines data collection,  
251 classification, and analysis, enhancing the researcher's understanding. This  
252 comprehensive methodology ensures a thorough exploration of culinary tourism  
253 dynamics and enriches existing body of knowledge.

## 254 **4. Analysis and findings**

### 255 **4.1 *Elements shaping the formation of a food destination's image.***

256 The core of effective destination branding resides in the construction of a compelling  
257 destination image. To achieve successful destination branding, marketers are  
258 recommended to thoughtfully select a cohesive blend of brand elements, thus  
259 sculpting a distinctive and easily recognizable destination identity (Yang et al.,  
260 2020). Recent research underscores the crucial role of food as a fundamental element  
261 in shaping the perception and overall branding of a destination (Lai et al., 2019; Tsai  
262 & Wang, 2017).

263 The promotional aspect assumes a pivotal role in nurturing both product  
264 development and the comprehensive image of a gastronomic destination (Cardoso et  
265 al., 2020). In this context, insights from Emma Pla, one of the interviewed experts,  
266 highlight that “*everything related to the design, promotion plan, marketing, and*  
267 *communication of gastronomy would have significant weight here to create a set of*  
268 *expectations that must then be fulfilled to be truly perceived with a certain level of*  
269 *quality*”. Qualitative analysis underscores the prominence of the quality category,  
270 which emerges as the most frequently mentioned (refer to Table 4 and 5). Figure 1,  
271 illustrating the network depicting the generation of an image for a destination,  
272 reveals a robust correlation with the quality category, with detailed codes provided in  
273 Tables 4 and 5 and visually represented in Figure 2, the word cloud for quality.

274 [Figure 1]

275 [Figure 2]

276 [Figure 3]

277 [Table 4]

278 [Table 5]

279 Moreover, Emma Pla accentuates the importance of prior destination knowledge and  
280 information derived from third-party entities (refer to Figure 1). At this juncture, the  
281 pivotal roles played by digital marketing and social media emerge prominently,  
282 acting as influential factors in shaping the development of the destination’s image  
283 (Onorati & Giardullo, 2020; Soltani et al., 2020).

284 In a complementary perspective, Fernando Rodríguez de la Riva Cremades identifies  
285 three distinct factors that significantly contribute to the recognition of a gastronomic  
286 destination (consult Figures 3 and 4 and Tables 4 and 6). Primarily, he underscores  
287 the indispensable role played by acclaimed chefs with strong ties to the specific  
288 locale. The Basque Country, in this context, stands out for housing nationally and  
289 internationally renowned culinary experts (Franklin, 2016). Additionally, Fernando  
290 Rodríguez de la Riva Cremades acknowledges the pivotal contribution of  
291 distinguished restaurants, even if situated in different regions, as they become  
292 inherently linked to the original territory. Lastly, he emphasizes the importance of a

293 high-quality product intricately connected to the region and its distinctive culinary  
294 craftsmanship (see Figures 2 and 3).

295 [Figure 4]

296 [Table 6]

297 The perceptions tourists develop about a location are profoundly influenced by their  
298 interactions with residents, playing a pivotal role in shaping the overall destination  
299 image. It becomes imperative for the local society to actively support and endorse the  
300 destination, thus bestowing credibility upon the territory (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2019;  
301 Tse & Tung, 2021). The critical aspect lies in nurturing empathy and fostering a  
302 sense of camaraderie among the local population, particularly in the sphere of  
303 gastronomy. This collective attitude is deemed indispensable for constructing a high-  
304 quality image that imparts meaningful value to the product, as emphasized by Hsu  
305 and Scott (2020). Notably, the Basque Country exemplifies a compelling and  
306 consistent message and narrative, rendering it easily identifiable for the end  
307 audience.

#### 308 **4.2 The significance of personal incentives as food tourism motivators.**

309 Tourists are motivated by various factors (Park et al., 2020). Emma Pla highlights the  
310 unique nature of gastronomy not being the sole motivation for traveling to a  
311 gastronomic destination (Su et al., 2018; 2020). This recognition allows for the  
312 classification of tourists into different types based on their varying degrees of affinity  
313 and importance regarding gastronomy at the destination, influencing their decision-  
314 making process (Knollenberg et al., 2020).

315 Tourists may engage in one or several gastronomic activities at the destination, as  
316 illustrated in Figure 5. These types of tourists view gastronomy as a secondary  
317 motivation (Balderas-Cejudo et al., 2021). Emma Pla emphasizes the considerable  
318 challenge faced by tourist managers in effectively managing gastronomic tourism  
319 due to the diverse segments it can cater to and the myriad benefits it offers. Pla  
320 states, "*The great challenge that I believe tourist managers face in managing*  
321 *gastronomic tourism is the great variety of segments that gastronomic tourism can*  
322 *be directed to if we really want to take advantage of all the benefits it can bring.*"

323 [Figure 5]

324 Conversely, even though more niche, there are tourists who regard gastronomy as the  
325 primary motivation for their journey (Su et al., 2020). Emma Pla further classifies  
326 these enthusiasts into four distinct groups: the gourmet, those seeking gastronomy-  
327 related events, individuals wishing to explore culture through gastronomy, and the  
328 wine tourist, as shown in Figure 5 (Balderas-Cejudo et al., 2021).

329 Fernando Rodríguez de la Riva Cremades categorizes tourists based on the  
330 significance of gastronomy when traveling to a destination. Unlike visitors whose  
331 primary motivation is gastronomy, there is another category that considers  
332 gastronomy as an important factor (refer to Table 7 and Figure 6). Finally, there is a  
333 third category of tourists who travel for different reasons but choose to indulge in  
334 culinary delights at the destination (see Figure 5) (Su et al., 2018).

335 [Table 7]

336 [Figure 6]

337 Eva Ballarín distinguishes between different types of tourists based on their approach  
338 to gastronomy (consult Figure 7 and Table 8). She identifies three categories: those  
339 who relish gastronomy, purely gastronomic tourists, and those who do not prioritize  
340 the culinary aspect in their journeys. Eva Ballarín emphasizes the significant value  
341 attributed to gastronomic tourists, underlining their substantial economic  
342 contribution when exploring a destination known for its culinary offerings, as  
343 presented in Figure 5.

344 [Figure 7]

345 [Table 8]

346 According to Eva Ballarín, individuals engaged in gastronomic tourism possess a  
347 more comprehensive perspective. They appreciate the opportunity to explore the  
348 local territory, such as visiting a cheese factory, observing cider production, or  
349 witnessing cows in mountainous landscapes (Figure 6 and Table 7). She  
350 characterizes these tourists as having a desire to discover new experiences, stroll  
351 through streets, frequent bars, and indulge in pintxos. Importantly, Eva Ballarín

352 emphasizes the value of these tourists, noting that their inclination to explore and  
353 spend money contributes significantly to the economic vitality of the destination. In  
354 her own words, she states, "*It is a tourist who has a lot of value because it is a tourist*  
355 *who spends.*"

356 Eva Ballarín underscores the importance of climate in the choice of a gastronomic  
357 destination, even in regions with a renowned culinary scene. Despite the Basque  
358 Country's culinary excellence, a noteworthy challenge arises due to its less  
359 favourable weather—a factor that significantly concerns many tourists, though it  
360 holds less weight for cultural or food-focused tourists (Zeng et al., 2023).

361 To address this challenge, strategic campaigns must be implemented, as depicted in  
362 Figure 1, to create a substantial impact. These campaigns play a vital role in directing  
363 attention to the gastronomic offerings of the Basque Country and offsetting the  
364 appeal of destinations with more favourable weather conditions, particularly for  
365 tourists with a broader cultural or culinary focus.

366 Erik Wolf emphasizes the crucial consideration of aligning values in decision-  
367 making when it comes to choosing a destination. According to him, the newer  
368 generations factor in the values emitted by a destination and its stakeholders in their  
369 decision-making process. Consequently, they opt for places that not only align with  
370 their ideals but also evoke excitement. Erik Wolf highlights motivations such as a  
371 preference for local products, the authenticity of family-owned restaurants, a  
372 connection with the local community, compelling stories, and the opportunity to  
373 actively engage in the gastronomic process, as illustrated in Figure 5.

374 The demand for experiential activities in the gastronomic field has surged, with  
375 tourists and visitors increasingly seeking opportunities to delve into the entire  
376 process—from livestock to agriculture (Dixit & Prayag, 2022; Kokkranikal &  
377 Carabelli, 2021). This growing trend underscores the desire for immersive  
378 experiences that provide insight into the intricate facets of gastronomy from its  
379 origins (Carvalho et al., 2023).

380 Iñaki Gaztelumendi underscores the pivotal concept of the gastronomic experience,  
381 encompassing activities such as engaging with chefs, participating in Basque  
382 cooking classes, visiting producers, and immersing in wine tourism, thereby

383 establishing a comprehensive value chain (refer to Figure 3).

384 Moreover, gastronomy emerges as a key element contributing to competitiveness  
385 against other destinations (Mariani & Okumus, 2022). Even for tourists whose  
386 primary motivations lie in different aspects, gastronomy assumes a crucial role in  
387 differentiation, adding value that can be decisive in selecting a travel destination  
388 (Kokkranikal & Carabelli, 2021).

389 According to Iñaki Gaztelumendi, many individuals traveling to the Basque Country  
390 are highly motivated by gastronomy, yet for the majority, it is not the sole  
391 motivation. Instead, it forms part of a cluster of motivations—envisioning a unique  
392 place with its distinct culture, exceptional gastronomy, breath-taking landscapes, and  
393 modern cities that successfully intertwine tradition with modernity (see Figure 5).

394 Consequently, two distinct types of tourists can be identified based on their travel  
395 motivations: the culinary tourist, whose primary motivation focuses on gastronomy,  
396 and the generalist tourist, whose travel motivations span a broader spectrum, with  
397 gastronomy serving as a differential factor to consider.

#### 398 ***4.3 Enhancing understanding: The influence of perceived risks on culinary*** 399 ***tourism with COVID-19 as a precursor.***

400 The advent of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus and the subsequent global pandemic  
401 brought about profound changes, severely impacting both the tourism and  
402 gastronomic sectors. The challenges posed by COVID-19 compelled these once-  
403 thriving industries to navigate through uncertainties by adopting new norms and  
404 safety measures, aiming to safeguard the well-being of both tourists and businesses  
405 (Recuero-Virto & Valilla-Arróspide, 2022).

406 Emma Pla, reflecting on the evolving landscape, emphasizes that exploring a place  
407 through gastronomy involves stepping out of one's cultural comfort zone and trying  
408 new things. She raises an intriguing question about whether the aversion to risk and  
409 trying new experiences has been influenced by the pandemic, given the heightened  
410 sensitivity to food safety, hygiene, and past gastronomic experiences. Pla suggests  
411 that the current caution might make people less inclined to take risks in trying new  
412 things or exploring different cuisines and products.

413 Supporting this perspective, Erik Wolf confirms that the impact of the coronavirus  
414 on gastronomic tourism primarily focused on the health and safety concerns of  
415 consumers. However, he highlights differentiated behaviours, with some individuals  
416 maintaining a more conventional approach and others significantly influenced,  
417 leading them to avoid crowded settings (consult Figure 8).

418 [Figure 8]

419 Fernando Rodríguez de la Riva Cremades identifies the fear factor as a significant  
420 deterrent for many consumers, discouraging them from enjoying gastronomic  
421 experiences due to safety concerns for themselves and family members in high-risk  
422 groups. He notes the emergence of risk aversion as a new element shaping the  
423 behaviour of younger generations, compounded by economic repercussions and  
424 reduced spending during the pandemic. Despite this, Fernando Rodríguez de la Riva  
425 Cremades anticipates a rebound effect, where society will exhibit a heightened  
426 eagerness to embrace and indulge in gastronomic pursuits once again (see Figure 8).

427 In alignment with these observations, Eva Ballarín concurs, highlighting the  
428 significance of exercising prudence in interpersonal interactions and avoiding  
429 crowded spaces. She emphasizes that safety has taken precedence over the desire to  
430 savour delicious meals and indulge in gastronomic experiences (refer to Figure 9 and  
431 Table 9).

432 [Figure 9]

433 [Table 9]

434 Acknowledging the economic impact, Eva Ballarín agrees that uncertainty stemming  
435 from the pandemic has led to a cautious approach to spending, accompanied by  
436 increased raw material costs and electricity expenses. To address these challenges,  
437 the sector has sought solutions, implementing measures such as outdoor activities,  
438 table distancing, and the reduction of group sizes (Figure 8) (Fountain, 2021; Fusté-  
439 Forné & Ivanov, 2021).

440 **4.4 Critical determinants in the decision-making process for undertaking a**  
441 **gastronomic journey.**

442

443 Gastronomy has become a significant element in the tourism industry, setting  
444 destinations apart (Soltani et al., 2020). Emma Pla emphasizes its role as a cultural  
445 transmitter, conveying identity elements in a friendly manner through experiential  
446 proposals (refer to Figure 10). In today's hyperconnected world, gastronomy is a  
447 crucial differentiator, often influencing travel destination choices (Knollenberg et al.,  
448 2020; Mariani & Okumus, 2022). It holds substantial value by intertwining with  
449 local culture, acting as an identity element (Fusté-Forné, 2020a) (Figures 11 and 12).  
450 This connection facilitates the development of experiential tourism proposals,  
451 sparking increased interest and adding significant value to destinations (refer to  
452 Figures 10, 11 and 12 and Tables 10 and 11) (Park & Widyanta, 2022).

453

454 [Figure 10]

455 [Table 10]

456 [Table 11]

457 [Figure 11]

458 [Figure 12]

459

460 Fernando Rodríguez de la Riva Cremades explores culinary tourism's growth,  
461 turning gastronomy into a magnetic attraction for tourists interested in cultural  
462 aspects (Cardoso et al., 2020). He distinguishes between everyday meals and  
463 culinary tourism experiences, highlighting the latter's uniqueness, contributing to the  
464 recent surge in culinary tourism (see Figures 13 and 14 and Table 12) (Rousta &  
465 Jamshidi, 2019).

466 [Figure 13]

467 [Figure 14]

468 [Table 12]

469

470 Identity aspects are crucial for authenticity, according to Emma Pla (refer to Figures  
471 13 and 14 and Table 12) (Fusté-Forné, 2020a; Latiff et al., 2019). Erik Wolf notes  
472 the cultural contribution of gastronomy, emphasizing the deep-rooted gastronomic  
473 culture in the Basque Country (Figures 15 and 16 and Table 13). Gastronomy  
474 becomes integral to the Basque Country's value chain, leveraging its cultural  
475 significance in the tourism industry.

476

477 [Figure 15]

478 [Figure 16]

479 [Table 13]

480

481 Eva Ballarín introduces the concept of a gastronomic destination, differentiating it  
482 from mere eating on vacation. She stresses the need for a strategic plan and  
483 gastronomic singularity for a place to be considered a culinary destination (refer to  
484 Figure 15). Culinary tourism thrives in destinations like the Basque Country, which  
485 strategically highlights its unique values through high-quality products, territory, and  
486 relevance (Figure 15). The Basque Country's culinary transformation generates  
487 global attraction and prestige, evolving into a renowned culinary destination.

488 Iñaki Gaztelumendi links social changes to gastronomy's influence on tourism,  
489 attributing it to increased promotion and societal emphasis on emotions and  
490 experiences. He asserts that gastronomy is integral to a territory, shaping its culture  
491 and authenticity (Figure 10). Iñaki Gaztelumendi underscores the importance of  
492 gastronomic culture and tradition in the Basque Country, noting distinctions between  
493 haute cuisine and popular cuisine, emphasizing their connection to local production.

## 494 **5. Conclusions**

495 The exploration of the interplay between gastronomy and tourism has evolved within  
496 the paradigm shift in tourism research, emphasizing the centrality of local food in  
497 enhancing destination appeal (Hsu & Scott, 2020). This study underscores the  
498 strategic utilization of local cuisine for branding and regional development,  
499 contributing to the enhancement of tourists' experiences and regional identity  
500 (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2019; Stone et al., 2021; Tsai & Wang, 2017).

### 501 **5.1 Theoretical implications**

502 This research makes multifaceted theoretical contributions that significantly enhance  
503 our understanding of key dynamics in gastronomic tourism. Firstly, it sheds light on  
504 the intricate factors influencing the development of a gastronomic destination's  
505 image, emphasizing the pivotal roles of renowned chefs, distinguished restaurants,  
506 and high-quality local products in shaping the gastronomic destination's identity.  
507 Supported by a conceptual framework illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, drawing on prior

508 literature (Choe & Kim, 2018; de Jong & Varley, 2017; Promsivapallop &  
509 Kannaovakun, 2019; Tsai & Wang, 2017; Yasami et al., 2020), the research extends  
510 its insights to various dimensions, including tourists' motivations, preferences, and  
511 overall experiential quality.

512 Enriching the framework with insights from wine tourism literature (Lai et al., 2019;  
513 Seo et al., 2014; Wu & Liang, 2020), it introduces cognitive and affective  
514 dimensions, highlighting both tangible and emotional facets within gastronomic  
515 destination images. Building on existing research, the study underscores the  
516 influential roles of cognitive and affective images in shaping tourists' intentions,  
517 satisfaction, place attachment, and behaviour. Furthermore, it reinforces the robust  
518 correlation between a destination's food perception and tourists' behaviour,  
519 emphasizing the practical implications of positive gastronomic images on  
520 satisfaction and loyalty (Prayag et al., 2016; Toudert & Bringas-Rábago, 2019; Tsai  
521 & Wang, 2017). Notably, the research enriches the theoretical landscape by  
522 emphasizing the critical role of affective images in fortifying emotional connections  
523 during gastronomic experiences, contributing significantly to the nuanced  
524 understanding of gastronomic tourism dynamics.

525 Secondly, this study significantly advances the understanding of tourists' motivations  
526 in food tourism, building on a rich body of literature exploring factors that shape  
527 preferences in travel. Food tourism, characterized by immersive cultural experiences  
528 akin to "cultural anthropology", involves deep engagement with diverse traditions  
529 through local cuisine, delving into the social, cultural, and historical significance of  
530 regional foods (Ellis et al., 2018; Goolaup et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2020). The study  
531 highlights the influence of taste on visitors' attitudes toward travel experiences,  
532 emphasizing quality, enjoyment, cooking techniques, and presentation as factors  
533 impacting perceptions and destination choices (Su et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020).  
534 Furthermore, the research categorizes motivations into distinct types based on the  
535 significance of gastronomy in travel preferences, revealing diverse segments of  
536 tourists (Balderas-Cejudo et al., 2021). Figures 5, 6, and 7 visually represent these  
537 classifications, providing a detailed perspective on the motivations driving  
538 individuals to engage in gastronomic experiences.

539 Thirdly, this research delves into the exploration of perceived risks associated with  
540 gastronomic tourism, offering a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted  
541 dimensions that influence consumer decision-making. Delving into financial,  
542 performance, psychological, and physiological aspects (Han et al., 2019; Seger-  
543 Guttman & Gilboa, 2023; Zou & Meng, 2020), the research emphasizes that risk  
544 perception involves an individual's evaluation of potential threats linked to travel  
545 decisions, impacting attitudes, behavioral intentions, and predicting travel avoidance  
546 (Dash, 2020). Particularly relevant amid the global pandemic, COVID-19 travel risk  
547 emerges, affecting economic stability, employment, and tourist confidence, with  
548 media exaggeration amplifying fear and influencing behaviours (Dogramadjieva &  
549 Terziyska, 2022; Luo & Lam, 2020; Yu et al., 2021). Conversely, the concept of  
550 COVID-19 travel safety is explored, focusing on implemented measures and  
551 protocols to ensure tourists' safety and prevent the virus's spread. The perception of  
552 safety, particularly in the COVID-19 era, plays a pivotal role in shaping tourists'  
553 attitudes, intentions to visit, and trust in service providers. The study introduces the  
554 concept of travel serenity, positively influencing attitudes and safety perceptions,  
555 mitigating fear and anxiety, and highlighting the substantial impact of safety  
556 perceptions on behavioral intentions (Apaolaza et al., 2022; Bae & Chang, 2021).

557 Finally, this study significantly contributes to the evolving landscape of tourism  
558 research, particularly emphasizing the pivotal role of local food in destination appeal  
559 (Hsu & Scott, 2020). Aligning with strategic destination branding and regional  
560 development (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2019; Stone et al., 2021; Tsai & Wang, 2017), the  
561 research explores cognitive perceptions influencing tourists' decisions. Recognizing  
562 the centrality of local cuisine in travel experiences, the study delves into the  
563 profound impact of gastronomic tourism, driven by motivations such as cultural  
564 immersion and sensory pleasure (Ellis et al., 2018; Su et al., 2020).

565 Gastronomic tourism, characterized as purposeful and culturally intertwined,  
566 accentuates the consumption of local cuisine, enriching the overall tourist experience  
567 (Okumus & Cetin, 2018; Mora et al., 2021). Amid the pandemic's influence on  
568 tourists' perceptions, particularly regarding local food consumption (Yu et al., 2021),  
569 this research addresses gaps by exploring the motivations, preferences, and  
570 behaviours of tourists and 'foodies' (Hiamey et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2019; Sánchez-  
571 Cañizares et al., 2020).

572 With a focus on the Basque Country and its renowned New Basque Cuisine, the  
573 study investigates the region's place-branding strategy, highlighting its emphasis on  
574 sensory food experiences and establishing itself as a premier culinary destination  
575 (Balderas-Cejudo et al., 2022; Muñiz-Martinez & Florek, 2023). The research  
576 extends beyond identification to a comprehensive understanding of critical  
577 determinants shaping tourists' decisions in the gastronomic tourism field, using  
578 Figures 10-16 and Tables 10-13 (Fusté-Forné, 2020a; Knollenberg et al., 2020).

## 579 **5.2 Managerial recommendations**

580 Our managerial contributions offer precise insights and actionable recommendations  
581 for stakeholders actively involved in managing and promoting gastronomic  
582 destinations. Firstly, in the sphere of branding and promotion, stakeholders are  
583 advised to develop a cohesive brand strategy that accentuates quality, authenticity,  
584 and diversity. Implementing targeted digital marketing campaigns on platforms such  
585 as Instagram and leveraging user-generated content can significantly enhance  
586 visibility and engagement (Onorati & Giardullo, 2020; Soltani et al., 2020). Expert  
587 insights from Emma Pla and Fernando Rodríguez de la Riva Cremades emphasize  
588 the need for tailored promotion plans that align with tourist expectations.  
589 Stakeholders can implement this by collaborating with local influencers, organizing  
590 virtual tasting events, and creating engaging online content that showcases the  
591 unique gastronomic offerings. Furthermore, it is paramount to strengthen the cultural  
592 identity of foods and culinary traditions to expand the possibilities of use in the  
593 context of the gastronomy and hospitality industry. As exemplified by the efforts of  
594 Cassava, a Brazilian food with extensive culinary uses of both the fresh root and its  
595 derived products, reinforcing cultural identity not only preserves culinary heritage  
596 but also opens new avenues for innovation and culinary exploration  
597 (Gonçalves et al., 2024).

598 Additionally, emerging ideas such as the Honey-kombucha beverage with yerba  
599 maté infusion represent innovative approaches to gastronomic offerings (Fernando  
600 dos Santos et al., 2024). Combining two globally recognized drinks, kombucha and  
601 yerba mate, in a novel product not only showcases creativity but also has the  
602 potential to become an ambassador of destinations. Leveraging local influencers  
603 from Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay to endorse this beverage could

604 enhance its visibility and appeal, serving as a model for implementation in other  
605 regions.

606 Secondly, recognizing the diverse motivations among gastronomic tourists, this  
607 study recommends a highly segmented approach in tourist management.  
608 Stakeholders should tailor their marketing strategies based on different tourist types,  
609 ranging from generalists to gastronomic enthusiasts (Balderas-Cejudo et al., 2021).  
610 To implement this, destination managers can leverage data analytics to identify and  
611 understand their target audiences better. Customized tour packages, themed events,  
612 and partnerships with culinary influencers can then be developed to cater to the  
613 specific interests and preferences of each segment.

614 Although Burmese, Cambodian, and Laotian cuisines may not be widely recognized  
615 on a global scale, they boast rich culinary traditions appreciated by foreign tourists.  
616 Despite influences from more popular cuisines, customer perceptions are fluid and  
617 adaptable. By capitalizing on the unique strengths of each culinary tradition, tourism  
618 development can be nurtured through a narrative of local inclusivity. These  
619 initiatives merit consideration due to their significant potential for fostering cultural  
620 exchange and culinary exploration (Sharma & Wattana, 2024).

621 Thirdly, addressing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, destinations  
622 should proactively manage perceived risks associated with gastronomic tourism.  
623 Practical actions include implementing stringent safety measures, adopting  
624 technology for touchless transactions and reservations, and communicating  
625 effectively with tourists about the safety protocols in place (Apaolaza et al., 2022;  
626 Bae & Chang, 2021). Drawing insights from this research, particularly those related  
627 to nuanced tourist responses (Figures 8 and 9), destination managers can further  
628 refine their strategies. Collaborating with health and safety accreditation programs  
629 and leveraging technology for real-time updates on safety measures can contribute to  
630 building and maintaining tourist confidence. Moreover, it is important to highlight  
631 that the adoption of street food and food trucks, as observed in Brazilian contexts (de  
632 Souza Bispo & Almeida, 2020), has not been fully embraced in other regions,  
633 including the Basque Country.

634 Lastly, our research highlights the significance of experiential activities in  
635 gastronomic tourism. Tourism professionals are encouraged to go beyond traditional  
636 dining experiences and focus on immersive activities that showcase the entire  
637 gastronomic process. To implement this, destinations can organize guided farm-to-  
638 table tours, cooking classes with local chefs, and collaborative events with local  
639 producers. Creating interactive maps or apps that guide tourists through the  
640 gastronomic journey within the destination can enhance the overall appeal of  
641 culinary offerings (Dixit & Prayag, 2022; Kokkranikal & Carabelli, 2021). Providing  
642 tourists with opportunities to actively participate in food-related activities fosters a  
643 deeper connection with the local gastronomic culture, resulting in memorable and  
644 authentic experiences.

## 645 **6. Limitations and future research lines**

646 Despite the comprehensive insights provided, the study has certain limitations. The  
647 research is focused on the Basque Country, and findings may not be entirely  
648 generalizable to other regions. Additionally, the study primarily relies on qualitative  
649 data, and further quantitative research could provide a more extensive understanding  
650 of the identified themes and categories. Future studies should also consider the  
651 evolving nature of gastronomic tourism in response to global events and societal  
652 changes.

653 While our study provides comprehensive insights into gastronomic tourism in the  
654 Basque Country, certain limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the regional  
655 focus raises concerns about the generalizability of findings to other cultural contexts  
656 or hospitality norms (Han et al., 2019). To address this limitation, future research  
657 could explore cross-cultural studies, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of  
658 variations in perceptions and behaviours across different regions.

659 Secondly, our reliance on qualitative data limits the study's breadth, and  
660 incorporating quantitative research methods in future studies could offer a more  
661 robust understanding of identified themes and categories. This would involve  
662 quantitative surveys, statistical analyses, and data triangulation to validate and  
663 expand upon the qualitative findings. Insights from such quantitative research could

664 enhance the overall comprehensiveness of understanding gastronomic tourism  
665 dynamics (Han et al., 2019).

666 Moreover, the study's temporal limitation, placed in the Basque Country and a  
667 specific period, may affect its relevance in different temporal or contextual scenarios.  
668 Future research should adopt a longitudinal approach, tracking sustained changes in  
669 attitudes and behaviours post-pandemic, offering valuable insights into the enduring  
670 impacts, and ensuring the study's relevance over time (Kim et al., 2019;  
671 Dogramadjieva & Terziyska, 2022).

672 In response to identified limitations, there are compelling research lines within  
673 gastronomic tourism that align with contemporary advancements. One intriguing  
674 avenue involves the exploration of artificial intelligence (AI) to personalize culinary  
675 experiences. It would be rather revealing to investigate the impact of AI-driven  
676 systems that tailor gastronomic journeys based on individual preferences, dietary  
677 constraints, and cultural nuances affect tourism. The integration of AI-driven  
678 recommendation systems for personalized food itineraries and culinary adventures  
679 emerges as a pivotal aspect, shedding light on the transformative potential of  
680 technology in enhancing the individualized facets of gastronomic tourism (Wong et  
681 al., 2023).

682 Another captivating research domain revolves around the intersection of culinary  
683 tourism and climate change. This exploration seeks to unravel the intricate dynamics  
684 between gastronomic tourism and climate-related factors, examining how climate  
685 shifts impact food availability, influence local cuisines, and shape tourists' choices  
686 (Fusté-Forné & Jamal, 2020; Loehr & Becken, 2021). Besides, considering the  
687 dynamic nature of gastronomic tourism and the growing emphasis on health safety,  
688 examining consumers' and visitors' perceptions of health safety within the  
689 framework of street food and food trucks presents a significant avenue for future  
690 research (Neuman, 2018).

691 A potential future research avenue could explore the impact of Geographical  
692 Indications (GIs), Certificate of Origin (CO) and Denominations of Origin (DO) on  
693 willingness to visit a destination. GIs, being one of the most significant food quality  
694 instruments of the European Union, rely on the influence of origin as a crucial

695 informational stimulus in consumer behaviour. Meanwhile, CO serves as a marketing  
696 tool for gastronomic tourism in Spain, particularly emphasizing typical products of  
697 each area as part of their cultural identity. Analysing the combined effect of GIs, Cos  
698 and DOs on tourists' inclination to visit destinations could provide novel insights  
699 into how these certifications contribute to the appeal and attractiveness of  
700 gastronomic destinations, thereby informing destination management strategies and  
701 marketing efforts (Bytyçi et al., 2024; De Jesús Contreras & Medina, 2021; Rico,  
702 2023).

703 By delving into this area, scholars can provide insights into adaptive strategies for  
704 destinations, offering practical approaches to align gastronomic offerings with  
705 changing climates and promote sustainable practices. These innovative research  
706 directions, spanning personalization through AI and the impact of climate change on  
707 culinary tourism, represent dynamic pathways that contribute to the evolving  
708 landscape of gastronomic tourism research. These inquiries not only address current  
709 limitations but also push the boundaries of knowledge in the field, offering valuable  
710 insights for both academia and industry stakeholders.

711

712

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1038

**Table 1.** Theoretical purposive sample of experts in gastronomic tourism for qualitative research ( $n=5$ ).

Expert	Area of expertise	Employment position	Date of interview
Eva Ballarín	Trends, innovation, and strategy in tourism and hospitality.	Independent researcher. Consultant and international speaker. Founder and director of HorecaSpeakers, the first Spanish-language dissemination platform for hospitality. Professor of Strategy at Basque Culinary Center, OSTELEA/EAE, and other business schools. Director of the HIP Congress, the largest Horeca congress in Europe.	February 2022
Erik Wolf	Gastronomic tourism.	Founder of the Food Travel Trade Industry and founder and director of the World Food Travel Association. Author of several books on gastronomic tourism. Speaker and contributor to international media outlets such as The New York Times, Newsweek, Forbes, CNN, Sky TV, BBC, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.	February 2022
Iñaki Gaztelumendi	Destination management, cultural tourism, MICE, gastronomy, marketing, and communication.	Professor in the Master's in Gastronomic Tourism at the Basque Culinary Center (BCC) and collaborator in various Spanish universities. Consultant for the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in the field of gastronomic tourism and advisor to the BCC.	February 2022
Emma Pla	Wine tourism and, gastronomic tourism.	Ph.D. in Information and Knowledge Society from the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. Director of the University Master's in Innovation in Tourism Management. Coordinator of the Culinary and Gastronomic Heritage Tourism Management specialty at CETT Barcelona School of Tourism, Hospitality, and Gastronomy.	March 2022
Fernando Rodríguez de la Riva Cremades	Marketing, consumer behaviour, oenology.	Ph.D. with honours in Economics and Business Administration, specializing in Marketing from the Complutense University of Madrid. Researcher in Corporate Social Responsibility, Corporate Reputation, Consumer Satisfaction, and Stakeholder Relationship Management. Chief Executive Officer of PRADOREY Wineries.	April 2022

**Table 2.** Common research topics.

<b>Research topics</b>	<b>Examples of questions</b>
Gastronomic tourism.	As an expert in food tourism, what trends do you observe in the preferences and behaviours of tourists seeking gastronomic experiences?
Tourist image.	As an expert, how do you see the role of destination marketing in shaping the gastronomic image of a place?
Travel motivation.	In your experience, what factors most commonly motivate tourists to choose destinations with a strong culinary identity?
Perceived risk.	As an expert, how do you advise destinations in managing and mitigating perceived risks related to gastronomic experiences, such as food safety concerns?
COVID-19 risk.	Given the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, how do you see the future of culinary tourism evolving in terms of tourist preferences and safety concerns?
Travel decision.	From your perspective, how do culinary experiences factor into the overall decision-making process for tourists, and how can destinations optimize this aspect?

**Table 3.** Phases of the qualitative research.

Grounded Theory Phase	Atlas.ti Stage	Process	Description
Research Design	Before using Atlas.ti	Formulation of the research problem.	Problem formulation through literature review.
		Sample Design	Theoretical non-probabilistic sampling. It was developed throughout the entire research.
Data Collection		Expert interviews and observations	Five experts in the field of study were interviewed.
		Transcription of the 5 interviews	Each time one of the interviews was transcribed, it was reviewed and moved on to the following phases.
	Starting the Atlas.ti project	Project creation	Creation of a project. Primary documents (i.e., transcripts of the interviews) were included as they were obtained. At the end of the analysis, when theoretical saturation was confirmed, the Atlas.ti project included 5 primary documents.
Data Analysis	Textual Level	Segmentation of quotations.	The most significant text segments of each primary document were highlighted. Once the relevant quotations were highlighted, these were reviewed.
		Open coding	The concepts and ideas arising from the highlighted quotations were identified. Data were conceptualized through codes.
	Conceptual Level	Axial coding	The inductively and deductively linked codes were associated, allowing for their subsequent grouping. All relationships were reviewed.
		Selective coding	A main category was selected, and the remaining codes were related. As a result, a map of relationships between conceptual elements was created with the aim of formulating a narrative line.
		Review	All the work carried out with the 5 primary documents was reviewed.
		Development of conceptual networks	The code families were established as main nodes and the codes within these families as secondary nodes. Links were established.
		Preliminary construction of the theory	The initial conclusions were drafted.
Confrontation of literature and theory construction	Finishing the Atlas.ti project	Review of the emerging theory. Conclusions and discussion	All conclusions were written and related to the reviewed literature. The emerging theory was revisited to highlight nuances.

**Appendix.****Protocol**

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***Interview Guide. Number:******Interview Data***

Expert's name:

Contact date:

Interview date:

Interview location:

Interview duration:

***Common areas of interest***

- Gastronomic tourism.
- Tourist image
- Travel motivation
- Perceived risk
- COVID-19 risk
- Travel decision

***Interviewee's profile***

Education and Ph.D. (if applicable):

Research related to the research topic:

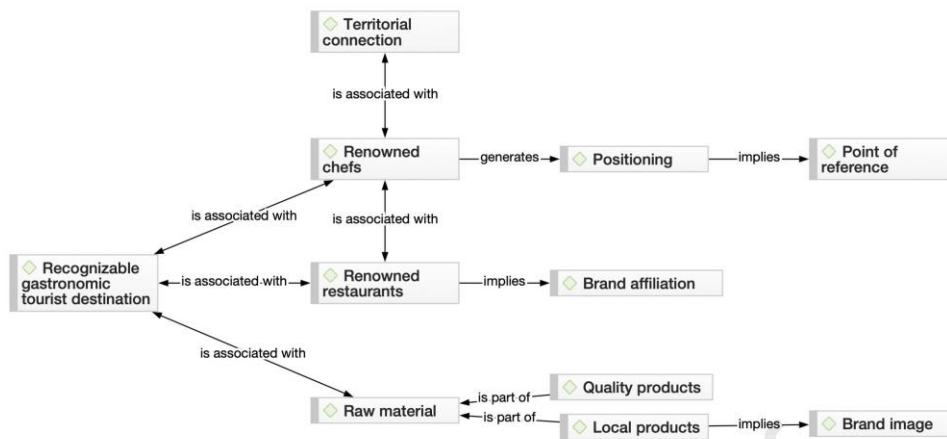
Non-research work related to the research topic:

Collaborations and communications:

Any other type of material that may be of interest:

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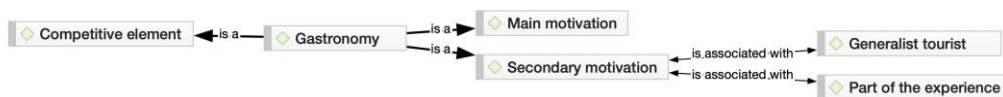
1050

1051 **Figure 3.** The creation of a recognized image for a culinary destination.



1052

1053 **Figure 4.** Word cloud for gastronomy.



1054

1055 **Figure 5.** Types of tourists according to travel motivation.

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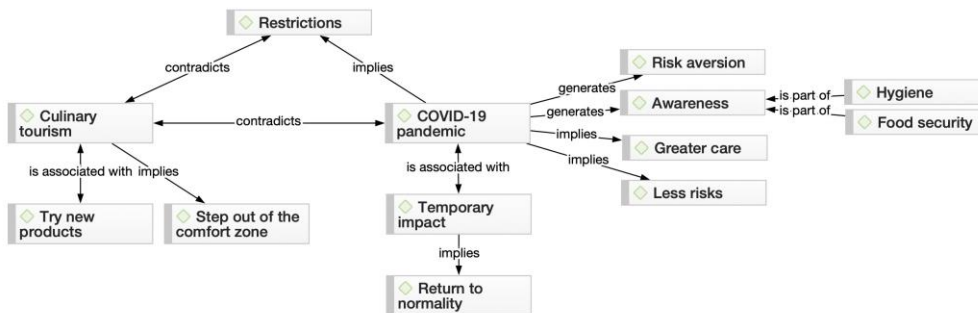
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1058 **Figure 6.** Word cloud for motivation.



1059

1060 **Figure 7.** Word cloud for tourism.



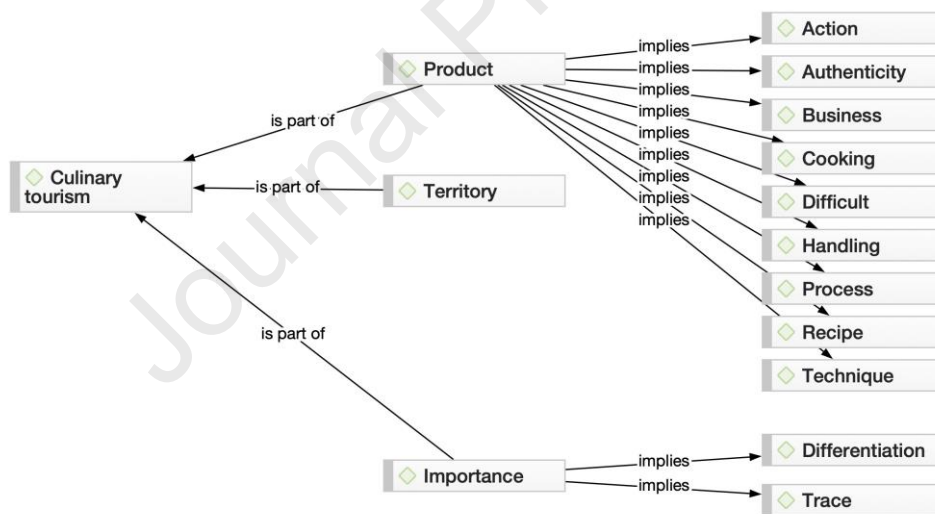
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1062 **Figure 8.** Impact of COVID-19 on social behaviour and gastronomic tourism.



1063

1064 **Figure 9.** Word cloud for risks.



1065

1066 **Figure 10.** Factors for culinary tourism.



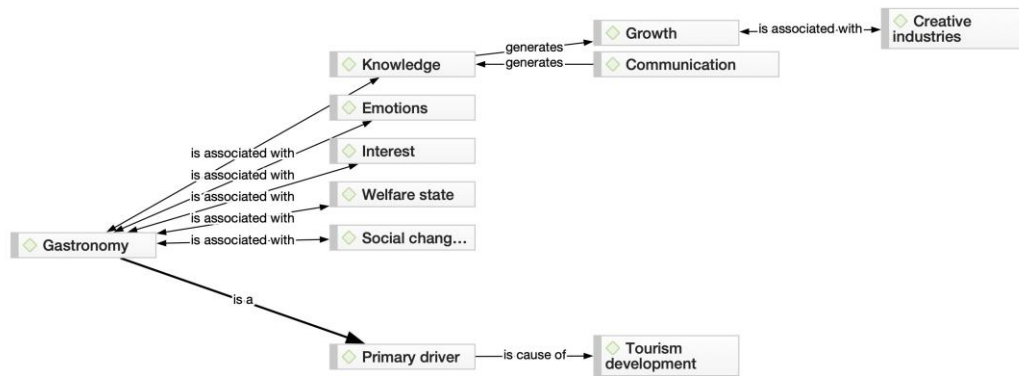
1067

1068 **Figure 11.** Word cloud for location.



1069

1070 **Figure 12.** Word cloud for society.

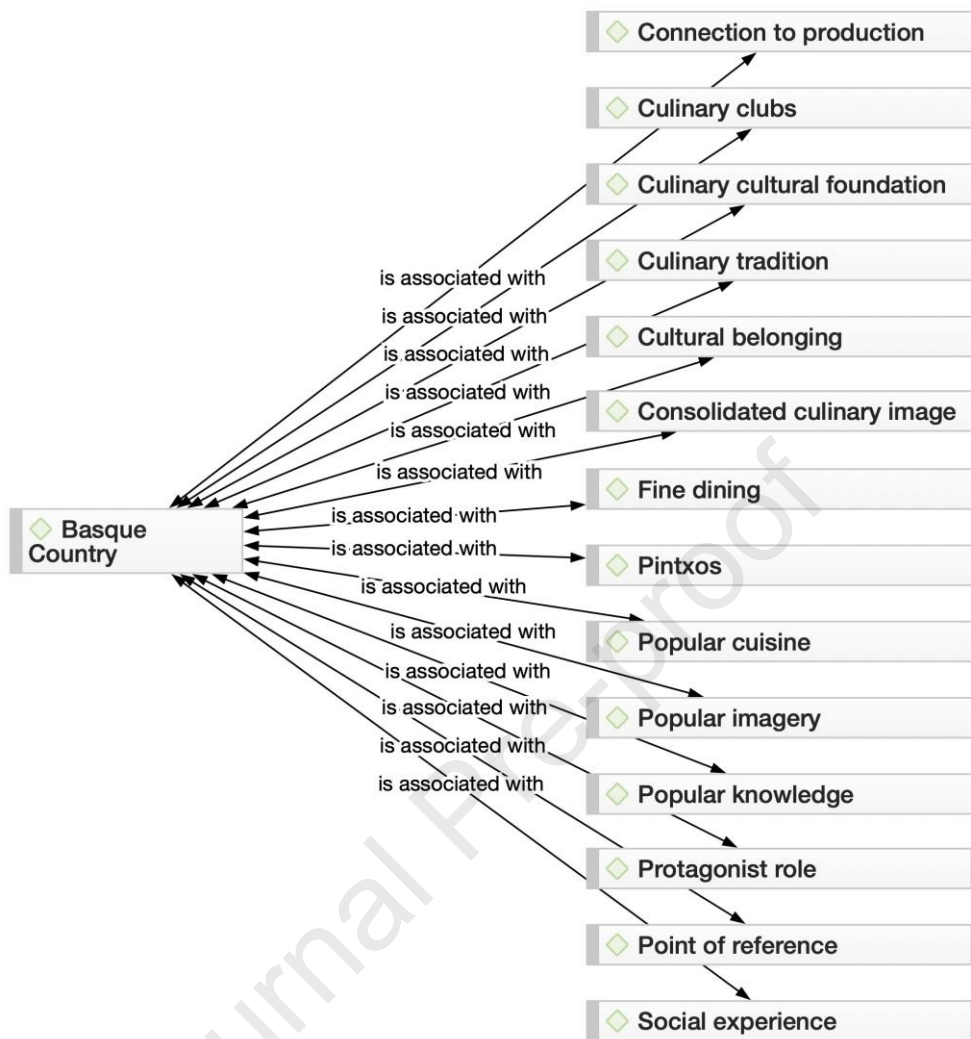


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1072 **Figure 13.** The impact of gastronomy.

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1074 **Figure 14.** Word cloud for marketing.



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1076 **Figure 15.** The relationship between gastronomy and the Basque Country.

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1078 **Figure 16.** Word cloud for Basque Country

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**Table 4.** Category Frequency.

Categories	Quality	Gastronomy	Motivation	Tourism	Location	Society	Risk	Marketing	Basque Country	Total
Total	601	549	474	324	286	220	121	109	92	2175

1080

**Table 5.** Frequency of Quality Category Codes.

Codes	Distinction	Action	Factor	Importance	Change	Time	Region	Experience	International	Trend	Consistency	Voyage	Target	Total
Total	230	107	60	57	51	43	18	10	6	6	5	4	4	601

1081

**Table 6.** Frequency of Gastronomy Category Codes.

Codes	Sector	Product	Space	Action	Player	Distinction	Total
Total	263	125	74	45	25	17	549

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**Table 7.** Frequency of Motivation Category Codes.

Codes	Experience	Culture	Product	Attitude	Factor	Knowledge	Total
Total	134	112	77	74	66	11	474

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**Table 8.** Frequency of Tourism Category Codes.

Codes	Sector	Voyage	Repetition	Player	Total
Total	187	114	12	11	324

1085

**Table 9.** Frequency of Risk Category Codes.

Codes	Economy	Psychology	Health	Threat	Physical	Total
Total	33	25	23	22	18	121

1086

**Table 10.** Frequency of Location Category Codes.

Codes	Region	International	National	Total
Total	104	93	89	286

1087

**Table 11.** Frequency of Society Category Codes.

Codes	People	Community	Target	Trend	Total
Total	102	75	35	8	102

1088

**Table 12.** Frequency of Marketing Category Codes.

Codes	Image	Marketing	Competence	Total
Total	60	43	6	109

1089

**Table 13.** Frequency of Basque Country Category Codes.

Codes	Region	Basque Autonomous Community	Culinary Region	Total
Total	86	3	3	86

**Highlights**

- Gastronomic destination's image: quality, authenticity, diversity.
- Tourists' motivations shape perceptions and experiential quality.
- Perception of safety crucial in influencing attitudes.
- Stakeholders tailor marketing strategies based on diverse tourist types.

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## **IMPLICATIONS FOR GASTRONOMY**

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### **Culinary destination enchantment:**

#### **The strategic interplay of local gastronomy in regional tourism development**

This study ventures into the domain of tourism research, emphasizing the pivotal role of local cuisine in shaping destination appeal. By harnessing the power of regional food for both branding and expansion, it elevates visitor engagements while fortifying regional identity. Employing methodologies like Grounded Theory and leveraging tools such as Atlas.ti software, the study delves deep into the impact of personal motivations, preferences, and risk perceptions on tourists and culinary enthusiasts.

Through a comprehensive examination comprising five expert interviews and an extensive literature review, the research unveils intricate insights into tourists' perceptions of culinary tourism. With a focal point on the Basque region, it accentuates the strategic integration of sensory gastronomic encounters for effective place-branding initiatives.

This research not only sheds light on the dynamic interplay between gastronomy and tourism but also inspires innovative approaches to destination marketing and visitor experiences. By spotlighting the rich tapestry of regional flavours and culinary traditions, it offers a pathway to not only enhance tourist attractions but also to foster a deeper connection with the cultural heritage of the destination.

## **DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

### **Culinary destination enchantment:**

### **The strategic interplay of local gastronomy in regional tourism development**

Our study on gastronomic tourism in the Basque Country represents a methodologically rigorous endeavour that stands as a beacon of quality within academic research. By employing Grounded Theory and leveraging sophisticated analytical tools such as Atlas.ti software, our methodological approach transcends conventional paradigms, enabling a nuanced exploration of tourists' attitudes towards food tourism.

Through the application of expert interviews and advanced analytics, our research generates a comprehensive array of insights, including intricate networks, category frequencies, and visually captivating word clouds. This methodological precision not only ensures the robustness of our findings but also enriches the depth of understanding in the field of gastronomic tourism.

By delving into the complex interplay of individual motivations, preferences, and risk perceptions, our study achieves a level of granularity that significantly contributes to both theoretical frameworks and empirical knowledge. This methodological excellence, combined with a strategic emphasis on the valorisation of local cuisine, positions our research at the vanguard of gastronomic tourism inquiry, establishing a high standard for future scholarly investigations in this domain.