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# A view on culinary tourism – case study of Catania, Italy

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**Abstract:** Travel to culinary destination has surged in the past few decades. Culinary tourism is increasingly important for world travelers, and Italy is at the top in Europe owing to many aspects related to an experiential type of tourism that people really like. The paper aims to give insight especially into the relevance of Italian food. It also presents the case study of the city Catania, Sicily. Sicily is one of the most important Italian regions due to its landscape, nature and beauty, and is characterized by quality and richness in local cuisine. Culinary tourism is an opportunity to revive and diversify tourism, promote local economic development, develop new uses of materials in the primary sector and to strengthen the image of Italian food. Results include the identification of key aspects relevant to tourists who set out on a culinary tour, because the gastronomic heritage of the Sicily is recognized as a valuable tourist product and an opportunity to discover the diversity of local and regional culture.

**Keywords:** food tourist, Catania, culinary experience, national cuisine

## 1. Introduction

Food is fundamental: we all need to eat. Food is essential for our existence and agriculture supplies us with it in more or less sustainable ways. On the other hand, consumers are more attentive to sustainability of production processes and this attitude justifies the growing interest in the purchase of typical products and the origin of the food. Consequently, people are calling for change towards sustainability, including academics, citizens, businesses, and institutions, and this has changed the accessibility of health food. Food systems are defined by place and local circumstances (Marsden, 2012; Blay-Palmer et al., 2015), and creative food is more likely to be demanded in urban areas rather than in rural environments, where the authenticity and freshness of products are considered the most relevant attributes (Montanari and Staniscia, 2009; Rachão et al., 2019). Food systems benefit from the rebirth of cuisine in a cultural, tourist, environmental and social key, considering the peculiarities of individual territorial areas in terms of naturalistic and landscape characteristics. Furthermore, food products are resources that fuel territorial

development, which increases competitiveness of farms, diversify business and generate profit from other sectors, including tourism. Food, territory, hospitality and tourism are interconnected. In fact, tourists are interested in visiting areas of production which are typical of a given territory in pursuit of learning about food products, production systems, material testimony such as old machinery, buildings and local culture. Food products play an important role in preserving villages and promoting experienced tourism, and are believed to be key drivers of tourism experience (Hjalager and Richards, 2002).

This study seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge on food and tourism, applying a qualitative, systematic literature review and a case study approach. Investigating this case study helps provide a better understanding of how and why food tourism has become so successful and may potentially yield some lessons that can be applied on a larger scale to global food tourism. The research adopted a qualitative, inductive research design. In order to set this case study into the context of literature dis-

cussed in the apposite section, a content analysis was conducted on more than 94 reviews of visitors who participated in gastronomy tour in Catania, Sicily. Online reviews are an import-

ant source for tourism research and practices because they constitute a mixture of facts, opinions, impressions, and emotions (Banerjee and Chua, 2016).

## 2. The importance of food and culinary in tourism development

Territories can be seen as a space for the coexistence, cooperation and competition between knowledge, powers, regulations, and the dynamics of competition among systems of production, distribution, and consumption of food related different parts of the world (Storper, 1997; Morgan et. al., 2006), which, highlighting their complex articulation, are often defined as food systems or food networks. The placeless food of globalized agro-industrial systems is countered by local food, taken as a symbol of a different model of development and quality (Pettenati and Toldo, 2018). This new emphasis on the local aspect in the food debate has involved social, political, and cultural movements, as well as agri-food policies, active in imagining and pursuing more just and sustainable food societies and systems. Terms such as “kilometer zero”, “food miles”, and “short supply chains” have become part – often without adequate critical reflection – of vocabulary and imagination associated with more environmentally and socially sustainable patterns of food production and consumption (Nicolosi et al., 2019). The main arguments put forward by the supporters of the relocation of agro-food chains relate to the possibility for local societies and economies to play an active role in production processes, without passively suffering the pressures of global economic dynamics (Hines, 2000).

Furthermore, food is a potentially great driver for tourism development; it is an essential and most important part of tourists’ experience and takes on a large variety of cultural expressions (Garibaldi and Pozzi, 2018). Food, and gastronomy in particular, gives value to a place; properly used landscapes paired with heritage have the potential to create attachment and attractiveness of a place (Lew, 2017). Gastronomy has become an indispensable element in the exploration of the culture and heritage of a certain region, where the two central concepts in the science of gastronomy are flavor

and tasting (Klosse, 2019). It embodies all the traditional values associated with the new trends in tourism: respect for the culture and tradition of a place, a healthy lifestyle, authenticity, sustainability, and experience. Tourists require cuisines that are highly dependent on local agriculture supplies, because certain food consumed while travelling may not readily be present in their everyday food practices. Local food seems to be an essential element in getting to know the culture and lifestyle of a tourist destination (Kapera, 2019). It represents traditional values associated with new tourism trends as well as produces new hybrid forms of gastro experience and bolsters the development of communities around gastronomy and food (Richards, 2015).

Food and gastronomy of a local community are essential factors determining tourism destination, however, this largely depends on the geographical context and the specific structural, infrastructural, historical, social and human resources of the territory involved combined with proper marketing. The heritage of the Mediterranean diet, recognized scientifically as one of the healthiest diets, testifies to the intense connections between peoples who live along the same sea and in neighboring territories. It is now known that the goal to be pursued in the future of agriculture is traceability of products together with the implementation of a sustainable production cycle that exploits waste to generate new products. If food is related and connected to a country, it becomes a powerful tool for tourism marketing and part of a local development strategy. In addition, innovations in food-related sectors could facilitate tourism development and therefore stimulate the economy of a region (Fernandes and Richards, 2017).

Consumption of culinary specialties, in many cases, has the same value as a visit to a historical monument. López-Guzmán et al. (2018) confirm that tourists tend to be satis-

fied with local cuisine only if the culinary offer serves as a starting point for learning about the culture of the destination.

Many studies show that the potential of a gastronomic product is intrinsically connected with the knowledge of the place where it is produced and consumed. In fact, authenticity has always been seen as an important aspect of food consumption, and therefore tourism and the search for authentic local and regional foods can become a reason to visit a destination (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017) and to experience new dishes (Charzyński et al., 2017); gastronomic tourism has the potential to provide visitors with new values and experiences, and to provide a different form of narrative. Gastronomic tourism also creates a desire to return to a given destination, forms loyalty among visitors. However promotion of gastronomic tourism requires a complex strategy involving many stakeholders (UNWTO, 2016).

Food and wine are playing an increasingly central role in tourism: 53% of the world's tourists regard themselves as "food and wine tourists", with the percentage ranging from 81% among the Chinese to 42% among the British. 71% of people who travel want to enjoy food and wine experiences that are memorable, while 59% of tourists declare that themed experiences help them choose between destinations

### 3. Italy and food: a close relationship

According to the latest UNWTO data (2019), the EU28 Member States accommodated 577 million international tourists in 2019, a 3% increase on the previous year. In 2018, revenue generated by international tourism amounted to 407 billion euros across all 28 states, around 33% of the world total. According to data from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat, 2019), tourism in Italy is booming with more than 428.8 million visitors in 2018, of which 50.5% were foreign tourists. Data from Banca d'Italia (2020) indicate a 2.2% increase on the previous year in the number of foreign visitors, and a considerable increase in international tourism expenditure (6.2%). Italy is the third country in Europe for the number of visitors to accommodation establishments, after Spain and France. However, uncertainty surrounding

(Garibaldi, 2020). In this context, every kind of event or gastronomic experience for tourists travelling to a given place is a catalyst, symbol, and generator of knowledge; these events and experiences also serve as means of promotion and stimulate tourism (Richards and Palmer, 2010).

At the same time, new technologies introduce both crucial challenges and opportunities to food and culinary tourism. Advancing transparency, encouraging connectivity, creating smart initiatives, and inviting tourists not only to use data but also to produce them, food has been identified as a key area for consideration in the sharing models at all stages of production and distribution, from the land to the plate, from restaurant to home. Improved and more wide-spread use of media (e.g., print, TV, cinema and radio) is conducive to the promotion of food tourism. Innovative models point to more sustainable and integrative formats of gastronomy linked to tourism. Tourist organizations and enterprises also need to be more proactive in order to ensure both new and wider tourist experiences: an example is a home restaurant as a place where meals are served just like in restaurants, linking the hospitality of home with appreciation of local food and typical cuisine (Privitera and Abushena, 2019).

the pandemic and Covid-19, and the resulting global economic slowdown will contribute to a slower growth in 2020.

Recently, interest in food tourism has increased. Italy is a destination where gastronomy is a consolidated and integral part of the tourist offer. Food tasting has always been considered a part of the journey and one of the main reasons for local and international visitors to travel in Italy. Moreover, Italy is the European country with the highest number of excellent foods with recognized geographical certification (Protected Designation of Origin [PDO] and Protected Geographical Indication [PGI], as defined in Council Regulation EC 510/2006).

Food in Italy plays a key role in the economic development of local communities and

in the relationship between local gastronomy, catering, and the competitiveness of the destination (Presenza and Del Chiappa, 2013). There are many Italian companies linked to the food sector and numerous events and initiatives related to food, wine, and gastronomic experiences. The relationship between food and tourism is now established, and just as tourism can be used as a motor for food, the latter can be used as a lever for tourism (Pagliuca and Rosciano, 2015). Additionally, street food also contributes to the success of gastronomic events and the image of Italian food (Privitera and Nesci, 2016).

One in three Italians has followed at least one food and wine itinerary in the last three years. The percentage of food and wine tourists who travelled with an overnight stay was 21%, as noted by Food Travel Monitor 2016, but now the number has increased to 45% (Garibaldi, 2019). All this confirms the new role of gastronomy, in which local food has become a component capable of influencing travel choices. Food tourism, as much as it relies on the culinary experience, also taps into other attributes, such as landscape and culture. Some tourists seek integrated offers that combine a variety of experiences, including the food and wine theme, as well as other cultural and recreational activities. International tourists are defined as mainly “eclectic” in their choice of experiences, whereas the theme of authentic, local and gourmet seems to resonate the most among the French tourists. The percentage of tourists who seek food and wine experiences outmatches that of tourists pursuing other activities, such as shopping (85% vs. 68% of general tourists) or music festivals (66% vs. 45%) (Garibaldi, 2020).

Coldiretti (2018) reports that, in combination, food and wine cultures frequently form part of a holiday in Italy, with 110 billion visitors (43% of local visitors and 57% of foreigners). The tasting experience is based on essential elements such as quality, authenticity, and sustainability; the green theme is a driving factor not only for agri-food production but also for 42% of tourists when choosing accommodation facilities (e.g., rural farms and agritourism) and events. Consuming local food is an alternative to globalization, a tool to socialize, and a means to communicate with local populations. When

traveling, foodies show the desire to know and experience the food and wine in all their aspects: during a tour they participate in a wide range of experiences, which can be very different from one another. The most popular food experiences, after eating typical local food in restaurants (indicated as popular by 73% of tourists), include visiting a market with local products (70%), buying street food from a traveling truck (59%), and taking short cooking classes. There is a strong interest in purchasing wine as a souvenir.

The Italian destinations where local food production is relevant are places with great heritage as well as high cultural and environmental value, and areas where there is potential for economic benefits, sustainable resource management, and employment through the celebration of traditional practices. Cultural ideas, traditions and practices are therefore understood, practiced and transmitted to provide more complex knowledge about the use of historical food.

In the varied Italian panorama emerge regions that excel in their offers. Emilia-Romagna is the region with the largest number of agri-food products with a geographical indication, while Piemonte holds the same primacy for wines (e.g., Barolo) and Campania for traditional agri-food products such as mozzarella and pizza. Lombardy boasts instead primacy in the catering offer, in terms of businesses and restaurants of excellence reported in the main guides (such as the noted *Michelin Guide*), as well as the largest number of craft breweries and pubs in Italy. Eastern Lombardy won the European gastronomic region (ERG) award in 2006. The ERG Prize aims to stimulate the debate on responsible tourism and on food and food practices, in order to achieve more sustainable food production and consumption, with attention to their environmental, social, cultural, and economic impact. Tuscany turns out to be the first Italian region for the number of farmhouses and wineries and most desired by Italian and international tourists, for the different types of catering services offered, accommodation, tastings, opportunities for educational farm experiences, etc. (Garibaldi, 2020). There is also a strong interest in the south, particularly in Sicily and Puglia. In addition, in Italy there are museums of taste and Creative

Cities linked to food and wine (Parma, Alba, and Bergamo).

Furthermore, there are more and more innovations in the food system and in the development of new technologies. Food tourists get information through increasingly

sophisticated technology that allows them to see exactly where the food was grown and how it was produced, as well as, instantly, where to book a restaurant, etc. Maximizing technology is an engine for food and wine tourism.

#### 4. Case study region: Sicily tells about its food

The area of study is Sicily, which is rich in cultural and archaeological heritage and has high tourism flow. Together with the islands of Ustica and Pantelleria, as well as the Aeolian (Eolie), Aegadian (Egadi), and Pelagian (Pelagie) archipelagos, Sicily forms the biggest region of Italy (25,832 km<sup>2</sup>), with more than five million inhabitants. It is also known as “Trinacria” due to its triangular shape. Mount Etna (3,323 m), one of the largest active volcanoes in the world, is located in northeast Sicily and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Sicily has a rich variety of local produce and is a destination renowned for its high-quality food and exciting food culture. There are many typical and traditional products of the island which local culinary tradition has knowledgeably enhanced, representing the identity of the territory, which, with their peculiarities, are a tourist attraction. Of the 67 agri-food and beverage industry products of PDO and PGI of the Sicilian region, 31 are wines (Privitera et al., 2020). Local food producers, from farmers and fishermen to bakers and cheesemakers, work in ways that respect natural resources. The Mediterranean climate supports local food processing, shortening supply chains, and investment in local food businesses, while citrus horticulture and preserving add value to produce, which is then kept in the local economy.

Over the centuries, Sicily – thanks to its position in the center of the Mediterranean – has experienced domination by a succession of cultures, each of which has left traces that determine the immense richness of Sicilian heritage in terms of architecture, art and culture.

Tourism in Sicily (Italy) is booming, as the latest data show. With more than 14.4 million visitors in 2017, almost 4.7 million arrivals from foreign countries, and 212 million overnight stays, international tourism registered an 8% increase from 2016 to 2017. The number

of international tourists has increased, and so has their spending: overall, foreigners visiting Italy in 2017 spent €39 billion, 7% more than in 2016. Data on tourist flows in Sicily compared with the previous year reveal an increase in arrivals and stays of 10.8%, with an average three-day stay in different hotel types (Regione Siciliana, 2018).

Sicily is among the Italian regions with the biggest endowment of archaeological resources. UNESCO has recognized historical-cultural sites of Sicily as part of the World Natural and Cultural Heritage Registry. They attract tourists and create employment as well as productive circuits. Among the most famous are the archaeological area of Agrigento (940,000 visitors in 2019), the Roman villa of Casale di Piazza Armerina (more than 307,000 tourists), the baroque cities of Val di Noto and Palazzolo Acreide, along with the Aeolian Islands, Syracuse, and the Neapolis area (about 680,000 visitors), and the cliff-top necropolises of Pantalica, Cefalù, and Mount Etna.

Catania is the second largest city in Sicily with an international airport providing good connections with many EU countries. It's a good example of the gastronomy of Sicily, in fact some features of the cuisine are similar to those of Sicily in general, with its numerous offerings of local food, including fine seafood thanks to Catania's location at the sea, it is perfect for a culinary city break. In this city, long way down the principal street *via Etnea* in the historic center of Catania, where the food is delicious in an eye-opening way, restaurants and bars are actually one of the surest ways to make a good living. Catania city, with 350,000 inhabitants, offers a beautiful scenario: the wonderful strength of the volcano Etna, the sea of the Ionian coast, the historical and archaeological heritage, the baroque churches and buildings, and the culinary traditions.

During a food and wine tour in eastern Sicily, the king of the table is the *arancino* (one of the symbols of Sicilian street food: it is as a snack or a meal consisting of a fried drop-shaped ball of rice stuffed with *ragù* of meat with tomato sauce and spices or with vegetables), along with seafood and Etna wine (produced with *Nerello Mascalese* and *Nerello Cappuccio*), the sweet wine *Zibibbo*, or a *Malvasia* from the Aeolian islands at the end of lunch. A dessert is the famous Sicilian *cannolo* (Fig. 1A), with its big and crunchy wafer filled with ricotta cheese made with sheep milk and garnished with chopped pistachios, for a quick but excellent meal. Filled with ricotta and sweetened with candied fruit, chocolate chips and icing sugar, it

is the perfect end of a meal or an excellent snack. Street food is very common on Catania as a food truck phenomenon: it is a way to preserve the cultural and social heritage, attract tourists, and offer fast, cheap, gourmet, and typical products (Alves da Silva et al., 2014; Privitera and Nesci, 2015; Alfiero et al. 2017). If, instead, the tourist prefers slow food, there are many restaurants to enjoy seafood as anchovies; the best-known and renowned *pasta alla norma*—tomato sauce with fried eggplant (Fig. 1B); or *spaghetti* with cuttlefish, covered with crispy crumbs and delicious *caponata* (fried mixed vegetables). And to conclude the meal, a dessert not to be missed is the Sicilian *cassata* (a cake with ricotta and pieces of chocolate, Fig. 1C) or puffs made with



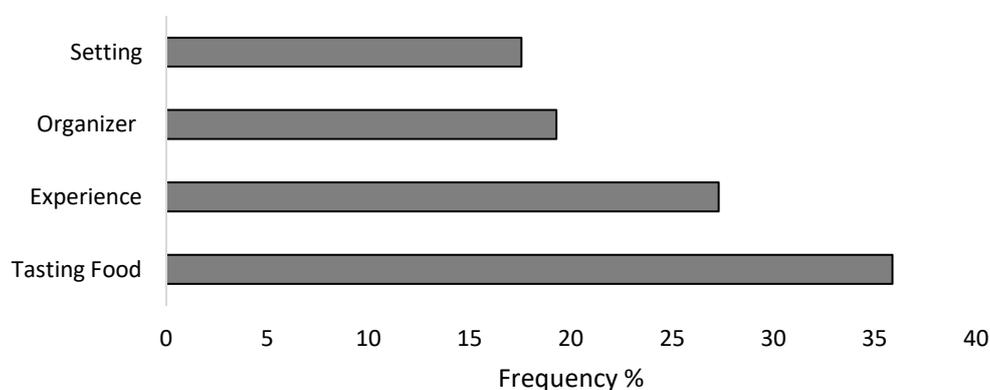
**Figure 1.** (A) The Sicilian Cannoli; (B) the *pasta alla norma*; (C) The *cassata*, and (D) the *granita* with *brioscia* (Photo by author)

almond paste. For a refreshing break or even for breakfast, especially during a hot summer, a *granite* with almonds, pistachio, or coffee, accompanied by *brioscia*, is similar to ice cream but distinguished by the ingredients and process (Fig. 1D).

In order to place this case study within the literature discussed above, a content analysis was conducted on more than 94 reviews of tourists or residents who participated in the experience of gastronomy tour in Catania (Tripadvisor, 2019). Culinary walks in Catania are becoming an element of food tourism development. This short tour is a perfect introduction to history and food culture of Catania. It was chosen in order to have sufficient robustness to capture the distinct characteristics of the observational units of analysis. The operator chosen (Operator, 2019) had to be embedded in the tourism and hospitality context and it had to represent a best practice example by providing evidence for the current successful realization of culinary experiences as demonstrated in travel reviews via Tripadvisor. Usually, it is a three-hour walking tour around the fish markets, back streets, and historical center, sampling the best daily selection of food and learning about Sicilian culture from a young local guide. The target is a small group experience designed for passionate foodies and curious travelers. Observing the characteristics of the travelers via Tripadvisor, many of them were foreigners (60.6%). They plan their trip on the web, using it both to collect information and to book individual components of the journey. Many of them highly appreciated

as excellent (78.7%) the flavor of the tastes and the appetite triggered by the culinary dishes of a great variety defining a “very relaxing and enjoyable tour”. As for the methodology, from the total of 1,205 words extracted from the visitors’ reviews dated December 2019, 88 words were coded as relevant and classified into four macro-dimensions: tasting food, setting, experience, and organizer. From the results, the total frequency of macro-dimensions was 524, where the most frequent one was tasting food (188), with medium frequency for experience (143) and lower frequencies for organizer (101) and setting (92).

In particular, from Fig. 2, it is possible to observe that the tasting food dimension (mentioning elements like the local food’s characteristics, eating habits, *arancini*, and adjectives indicating the tastes of food or wine) covers 35.8% of the codified frequencies, the setting-related dimension had a 17.5% frequency (indicating elements referring to the physical context in which the tour experience took place, such as the view of the Dome of Catania, the rich history, the fish market, and adjectives relating to the architectonic building), and the experience-related dimension accounted for 27.2% of the total frequency (a memorable and fabulous experience, the atmosphere, and the exhibition of street vendors and entertainment were the most frequent features named in participants’ reviews), while the organizer-related dimension accounted for 19.2% (the most frequent words in this case were “organization”, “perfect guide”, “services”, “staff”, and “private tour”).



**Figure 2.** Frequency percentages of culinary tour experience reviews in Sicily codified by dimensions (source prepared based on the author’s own study, n=524)

A review by a young woman highlights the “exaltation of the experience” to taste the food together with the identity of the places (e.g., fish market): “Great experience indeed! ... The tour was amazing. The place itself was charming and just for us. Fish Market...it was one of the most memorable experiences to see fishermen, fish mongers, and street vendors interacting in a crowded space”. Tasting food has been identified as a key area in the hospitality sector, and the search for culinary authenticity in a gastronomy tour is also a relevant motivation for consideration as a social experience to learn about culture. For example, a key message from a solo traveler is as follows: “It was so much more than a food tour! I got to know the area, culture, and people better through the eyes of my guide” (Tripadvisor, 2019).

## 5. Summary and conclusions

The findings from the content analysis are in line with the current literature about the main features in gastronomic tourism and substantially confirm the most discussed assumptions regarding issues in food experiences. The case of the culinary tour experience reveals that not only is the concept of food tourism able to produce heavy revenues for the local development of territory, but it also acquires the key role of enhancer of a tourism destination due to its ability to engage visitors beyond regional boundaries, by triggering supra-regional tourism flows. The identified dimensions confirm that the main focuses emerging from the visitors’ point of view are based on the local products’ characteristics, the overall sensory experience derived from participation in this kind of tour, and the efficiency of the organizational arrangements. The food becomes more than just a thing; it is a part of a greater context, a prominent element. When consuming, the visitor becomes part of a culture, even if just for the short time of the holiday. Visitors report satisfaction with their local culinary experi-

At the same time, a culinary tour also provides good memories of a journey with the knowledge of having tasted the traditional food of a country but also the opportunity to come into contact with residents. A tourist’s review on the Tripadvisor website says: “A great way to see Catania and taste the foods the locals eat. A truly wonderful experience that I would recommend to anyone who wants to get to know Catania – foodie or not.”

On the organizer side, a professional tour guide shares stories behind the local foods and at the same time builds a relationship with the travelers. An adult male tourist revealed in a review: “We had lots of history and time absorbing the colors, sounds, tastes and smells of the market... Aureliano, you were absolutely brilliant to hang out with! Wonderful, wonderful time on our adventure! Highly recommend!”

ence, valuing to a greater extent the atmosphere of the establishments and the innovation of the dishes. In addition to searching for new food experiences, they use the gastronomy tour as a tool to learn more about the culture of the destination and to satisfy the desire for interpersonal relationships with local residents.

Food experiences are what tourist remembers by culinary tours when come back to their home. It is necessary to improve the context where food is served, considering that consumers are more interested in enjoyment and experience than in materiality. This means recreating an atmosphere that evokes the territory and culture of the population living there, improving communication, creating food and wine itineraries, and combining them with visits to cultural and natural sites.

As the main future line of research, the author recommends strengthening the research to determine whether tourists who visit the city of Catania or Sicily, when they return to their home countries, also consume culinary items produced in this geographical area.

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