

From authenticity to competitiveness: local gastronomy as a development mechanism of tourism events in Montenegro

Od autentičnosti do konkurentnosti: lokalna gastronomija kao mehanizam razvoja turističkih manifestacija u Crnoj Gori

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Article info

Original scientific paper

Received:

21 May, 2026

Revised:

10 September, 2026

Accepted:

22 September, 2026

Published online: 22 October, 2026

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.71159/bizinfo260027K>

UDC/ UDK:

Abstract

This paper examines the role of local gastronomy as a development mechanism for tourism events in Montenegro, with special focus on the perceptions of employees in the tourism sector. Starting from the assumption that gastronomy constitutes an important element of destination identity and competitiveness through the provision of tourism events, the research aims to determine how employees perceive its significance, which dimensions shape their perception, and which factors influence the formation of attitudes toward gastronomy in tourism events as a basis for tourism development. The study was carried out during the summer tourist season of 2025 and included 344 employees in the tourism and hospitality sector in Montenegro. Results indicate that employees recognize local gastronomy as a significant developmental resource, with particular prominence of the dimensions of gastronomic authenticity and its economic contribution. It was found that the perception of gastronomy's importance is not one-dimensional but encompasses identity, promotional and developmental aspects, while attitudes regarding its role in tourism development depend on employees' professional and organizational context. The findings confirm that local gastronomy, when integrated into tourism events, can represent an important instrument for strengthening destination competitiveness and sustainable development.

Keywords: local gastronomy, tourism events, destination development, employee perception, Montenegro

Sažetak

Ovaj rad ispituje ulogu lokalne gastronomije kao mehanizma razvoja turističkih manifestacija u Crnoj Gori, sa posebnim fokusom na percepcije zaposlenih u sektoru turizma. Polazeći od pretpostavke da gastronomija predstavlja važan element identiteta i konkurentnosti destinacije kroz organizaciju turističkih manifestacija, cilj istraživanja bio je da se utvrdi na koji način zaposleni percipiraju njen značaj, koje dimenzije oblikuju njihovu percepciju i koji faktori utiču na formiranje stavova o gastronomiji u turističkim manifestacijama kao osnovi razvoja turizma. Istraživanje je sprovedeno tokom letnje turističke sezone 2025. godine i obuhvatilo je 344 zaposlena u sektoru turizma i ugostiteljstva u Crnoj Gori. Rezultati ukazuju na to da zaposleni prepoznaju lokalnu gastronomiju kao značajan razvojni resurs, pri čemu se posebno izdvajaju dimenzije gastronomske autentičnosti i njenog ekonomskog doprinosa. Utvrđeno je da percepcija značaja gastronomije nije jednodimenzionalna, već obuhvata identitetske, promotivne i razvojne aspekte, dok stavovi o njenoj ulozi u razvoju turizma zavise od profesionalnog i organizacionog konteksta zaposlenih. Nalazi potvrđuju da lokalna gastronomija, kada je integrisana u turističke manifestacije, može predstavljati važan instrument za jačanje konkurentnosti destinacije i održivog razvoja.

Ključne reči: lokalna gastronomija, turističke manifestacije, razvoj destinacije, percepcija zaposlenih, Crna Gora

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1. Introduction

In contemporary tourism, local gastronomy is increasingly gaining importance as an authentic and recognizable element of the offer of selective tourism forms. It not only enriches visitors' experiences but also contributes to building destination image, increasing tourism competitiveness, and stimulating long-term sustainable development (Giampiccoli & Mnguni, 2022). As a form of intangible cultural heritage, gastronomy represents an important resource for preserving local identity while simultaneously opening space for innovation, creativity and cross-sector cooperation between tourism, agriculture and culture (Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2023), which is clearly reflected in food offerings within various tourism events.

Tourism events today play an increasingly significant role in building and positioning destinations, as they enable the creation of recognizable and content-rich tourist experiences (Getz & Page, 2019; Mair, Weber, 2019). Their importance is evident not only in promotional effects but also in stimulating the local economy, extending the tourist season and activating the cultural and creative potential of the community (Santos et al., 2016). Through tourism events, the need to link local resources with contemporary market demands becomes evident, and gastronomy occupies a particularly important place. Tourism events that include gastronomic content (such as food festivals, tastings, gastro-tours and local manifestations) are becoming an increasingly important mechanism for positioning destinations in the tourism market (Juniarta & Suta, 2025; Nurwitasari et al., 2024). Research confirms that gastronomy has the potential to significantly influence tourists' decisions when choosing destinations, as well as their overall satisfaction and intention to return (Moura et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2019). In this context, attention is increasingly directed toward the perceptions and attitudes of actors in the tourism sector, particularly employees, who play a key role in shaping and implementing gastronomic offers (Ziakas, 2016). Their perception of the importance of gastronomy directly affects the level of integration of gastronomic content into tourism strategies and events, making this topic not only timely but also fundamentally important for tourism development (Ramos & Pinto, 2024; Yaman, 2025).

For this reason, it was particularly relevant to examine this phenomenon in Montenegro—a country with a rich gastronomic heritage and considerable potential for developing authentic gastronomic offerings, but which still faces the need for the systematic and strategic valorization of these resources within the tourism industry and tourism events. Similar challenges have been identified in Serbia, where a diverse tourism resource base has not necessarily resulted in its adequate market utilization, highlighting the need to adapt tourism products to contemporary demand and international tourism trends (Perić et al., 2018). The integration of local gastronomy into Montenegro's tourism offer is reflected in several prominent events organized across the country, such as the Fish and Wine Festival (Fešta od ribe i vina)

in Herceg Novi, the Olive Festival (Maslinijada) in Stari Bar, the Wine and Bleak Festival (Festival vina i ukljeve) in Virpazar, the Days of Širun (Dani širuna) in Budva, the Wild Chicory Festival (Žućenica Fest) in Tivat, Blueberry Days (Dani borovnice) in Plav and Carp Days (Dani krapa) in Plavnica. Through the presentation of traditional dishes, local food products, beverages and regionally distinctive culinary practices, these events contribute to the preservation and promotion of gastronomic heritage while enhancing the attractiveness and visibility of tourism destinations. Although tourism is one of the key sectors of the national economy, Montenegro remains underrepresented in international scientific literature as an empirical context for examining the relationship between local gastronomy and tourism events.

The tasks of the paper are to:

- examine the attitudes of tourism employees about the role and significance of local gastronomy within tourism events;
- identify the key dimensions and factors that shape their perception;
- determine significant predictors of tourism employees' attitudes toward gastronomy as a basis for tourism development arising from tourism events.

The aim of the paper is to establish how tourism employees perceive local gastronomy in the context of tourism events.

From this aim, the following research questions arise:

- How do tourism employees perceive local gastronomy within tourism events in the context of Montenegro's tourism development?
- Which dimensions characterize tourism employees' perception of the importance of local gastronomy within tourism events and the tourism development of Montenegro?
- What are the significant predictors of tourism employees' attitudes that local gastronomy offered in tourism events constitutes a basis for Montenegro's tourism development?

2. Literature review

2.1. The role of local gastronomy in tourism events as an element of tourism development

It is clear that local gastronomy represents an important segment of intangible cultural heritage and an increasingly important resource in developing contemporary tourism offerings, especially within specialized and thematic tourism events (Bessière, 2013; Ziakas, 2016). Evidence from rural communities in Serbia shows that the tourism valorization of traditional food can contribute to cultural preservation and local economic development, provided that it is based on community participation and culturally sensitive approaches to heritage management (Demirović Bajrami et al., 2025). The integration of local food into tourism activities can also strengthen local marketplace businesses by increasing the visibility of regional products, supporting small-scale producers and creating

broader economic benefits for the destination (Vuksanović et al., 2024). Numerous scientific studies indicate that gastronomy, as part of a destination's cultural identity, strongly influences tourist motivation, perceived destination value and overall visitor satisfaction (Dhillon, 2024; Yaman, 2025). In that context, tourism events that include local gastronomic contents contribute to creating an authentic tourist experience and strengthening the destination's competitive position (Juniarta & Suta, 2025). Employees in tourism play a particularly significant role in this process, as their perceptions and attitudes influence the level of application and promotion of gastronomy as a development resource (Macêdo et al., 2025a; Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2025a). This leads to the formulation of the first hypothesis (H1): Tourism employees have a positive perception of the importance of local gastronomy within tourism events in the context of regional tourism development.

2.2. Dimensions of perception of local gastronomy in the context of tourism events and regional development

The perception of the role of local gastronomy in tourism is not simple; it is a complex and multidimensional construct encompassing various aspects (Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2024a). Tourism employees may perceive gastronomy as an economic factor that stimulates the local economy, as a cultural element that contributes to the preservation of tradition, as a marketing tool for destination differentiation, and as a means to achieve sustainable tourism development (Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2024b). These dimensions together shape the overall attitude toward gastronomy within tourism events (Ramazanov et al., 2025). Identifying and analyzing different perception dimensions enables a deeper understanding of how employees evaluate the role of gastronomy and the extent to which they are willing to support its integration into tourism strategies (Moura et al., 2025; Macêdo et al., 2025a). Based on this multidimensional approach, the second hypothesis (H2) was formulated: The perception of tourism employees regarding the importance of local gastronomy within tourism events in the context of regional tourism development is characterized by several distinct dimensions.

2.3. Elements shaping employees' attitudes toward the role of local gastronomy in tourism events and regional development

Employees' attitudes toward the importance of local gastronomy are not formed spontaneously but result from the influence of various individual, professional and organizational factors (Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2024b). Key predictors include educational level, length of service in tourism, professional position, experience in organizing or implementing gastronomic events, and previous positive experiences with gastronomic offerings (Pizzichini et al., 2022). These factors can significantly affect the intensity and direction of employees' attitudes toward gastronomy as a development resource. Analyzing these predictors allows identification of key factors that encourage or limit support for gastronomic initiatives

(Lequeux-Dincă et al., 2024; Macêdo et al., 2025b). In the context of tourism events, these predictors gain additional significance because planning, organizing and implementing gastronomic content reveal how employees perceive its contribution to destination development. Given the importance of these influencing factors, the third hypothesis (H3) was created: Tourism employees' attitudes toward the importance of local gastronomy within tourism events as a basis for tourism development depend on multiple different predictors.

3. Methodology

3.1. Questionnaire design

A questionnaire was specially designed for the research and structured into several thematic sections: Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents — The first section addressed respondents' sociodemographic characteristics, including variables such as gender, age, place of residence (urban/rural), highest level of education and field of education. The aim was to profile the sample and analyze potential differences in attitudes in relation to respondents' individual characteristics.

Professional characteristics of respondents — The second section related to the professional context of tourism employees. This segment collected data on the type of organization in which respondents work (travel agency/organization, accommodation facility, food and beverage facility, educational institution in tourism and hospitality), job position (operational tasks, operational management, senior management, education) and length of service in tourism and hospitality. These variables enabled assessment of the influence of organizational environment, level of responsibility and professional experience on the formation of attitudes toward local gastronomy.

Perception of the importance of local gastronomy — The third section examined employees' attitudes regarding the importance of local gastronomy within tourism events and its contribution to destination development. This part comprised 15 statements (S1–S15) rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree). The statements covered aspects of authenticity, the promotional function of gastronomic manifestations, economic effects, sustainability and tourists' willingness to pay higher prices for authentic products (Kim, Eves & Scarles, 2009; Ellis et al., 2018; Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019; Ziakas, 2016).

Assessment of gastronomy as a basis for tourism development — The fourth section asked respondents whether they considered Montenegro's local gastronomy a basis for tourism development (No/Yes). The aim was to examine which factors influence this attitude and to what extent individual, professional and perceptual characteristics contribute to the belief that gastronomy, as part of tourism events, plays a key developmental role (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Okumus et al., 2018).

The questionnaire was previously validated through pilot testing and expert review, ensuring its reliability and relevance for the research topic.

Figure 1. Geographical location of the study area – Montenegro



Source: Kalenjuk Pivarski B. (map created for the purposes of this research)

3.2. Study area

The research was conducted in the territory of Montenegro, a country located in Southeast Europe on the Western Balkans, with an Adriatic coastline and marked spatial diversity that includes coastal, mountainous and continental regions (Djurović & Djurović, 2016; Cimbalević et al., 2019; Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2025a; Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2025b; Vujačić et al., 2024) (Figure 1). This geographic position has conditioned the formation of specific cultural and gastronomic patterns influenced by Mediterranean and continental traditions. The spatial and cultural heterogeneity of the country contributes to the diversity of the tourism offer and the formation of authentic gastronomic identities of different regions (Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2025a; Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2025b; Vujačić et al., 2024).

The study included employees from different segments of the tourism sector, i.e., hospitality, hotel industry, travel agencies and educational institutions that train personnel in tourism and hospitality. This methodological approach enabled a comprehensive insight into the opinions and experiences of employees in operational, managerial and educational structures.

3.3. Data collection and sample size

The study was conducted from early June to mid-September 2025, during the summer tourist season when the largest workforce is engaged in the tourism and hospitality sectors. Data collection was not linked to any particular tourism or gastronomic event. The respondents expressed their views from the professional perspective of key tourism and hospitality stakeholders rather than as visitors to, or representatives of, specific events. A total of 344 valid questionnaires were collected and analyzed, providing a relevant empirical basis for investigating employees' perceptions on the posed topic under consideration.

3.4. Statistical data processing

In the statistical analysis, basic descriptive statistics were first calculated. Then Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to reduce the initial set of 15 items to a smaller number of interrelated latent factors that are theoretically interpretable and empirically stable. Prior to factor analysis, its appropriateness was assessed using Bartlett's test of sphericity and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy, in line with Field's recommendations (2013). The obtained values indicated that the data were suitable for factor analysis. Factor extraction was performed using Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) with Oblimin rotation, considering the theoretical expectation that latent factors are correlated. The number of factors was determined by a combination of parallel analysis and the eigenvalue-greater-than-one criterion. Results indicated a three-factor solution that explains a satisfactory percentage of the total variance. All three dimensions demonstrated high internal consistency, and cross-loadings were checked following the guidelines of Tabachnick and Fidell (2019).

Following the exploratory phase, Exploratory Structural Equation Modeling (ESEM) was performed to further verify the stability and adequacy of the factor structure. ESEM is a methodological extension of classical EFA because it enables simultaneous modeling of latent constructs and a freer loading structure, while also testing model fit. Model evaluation was performed on the same dataset, since the sample size did not permit creation of a separate validation subsample. Model quality was assessed by standard fit indices (χ^2/df , CFI, RMSEA), whose values indicated an acceptable level of model-data fit.

After confirming the factor structure, binary logistic regression was applied to identify key sociodemographic and perceptual factors affecting the probability that respondents consider gastronomy a basis for tourism development. The model was estimated on the complete sample ($N = 344$) to preserve statistical power and avoid bias. Logistic regression was based on the logit transformation of the cumulative probability, with the dependent variable coded 0 (no) and 1 (yes). The model estimates predictor effects via odds ratios (OR), interpreted as multiplicative changes in the event probability when an independent variable increases by one

unit. The theoretical basis of the model is the logistic function:

$$\frac{\pi}{1-\pi} = e^{\alpha + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \dots + \beta_k x_k}$$

Taking the natural logarithm of the odds yields the linear logit model:

$$\ln\left(\frac{\pi}{1-\pi}\right) = \alpha + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \dots + \beta_k x_k$$

In this model, the β coefficients indicate the direction and magnitude of changes in the log odds of a positive response ($Y = 1$) associated with a one-unit increase in a predictor, holding all other predictors constant. Exponentiating these coefficients yields odds ratios ($OR = e^{\beta}$). For categorical predictors, effects are interpreted relative to the reference category. Logistic regression is appropriate for modeling binary outcomes because the logit can take any real value, while predicted probabilities remain between 0 and 1 (Hosmer et al., 2013; Menard, 2002). Model calibration was assessed using the Hosmer–

Lemeshow test, while classification performance and discrimination were evaluated using the classification matrix, sensitivity, specificity, and the area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUC).

3.5. Sample description

As noted, the study included 344 respondents. Females constituted 51.7% of the sample, while males accounted for 48.3%. By age groups, the largest share was the group up to 29 years (32.3%), followed by the 40–49 years group (28.8%), while respondents aged 50 and over had the smallest share (18.6%). Most respondents live in urban areas (71.5%), while 28.5% live in rural areas. By education level, the largest proportion hold a university degree or have completed college (36%), followed by those with master's or doctoral studies (28.2%), while 20.9% completed secondary school and 14.8% completed vocational college. The largest percentage of respondents have education in technology, agriculture and chemistry (43%), followed by tourism and hospitality (20.6%), while the smallest share is from economics, law and management (8.1%) (Table 1)

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of respondents' socio demographic characteristics

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	166	48.3
	Female	178	51.7
Age	Up to 29	111	32.3
	30–39	70	20.3
	40–49	99	28.8
	50 and more	64	18.6
Place of residence	Urban	246	71.5
	Rural	98	28.5
The highest level of education	High school	72	20.9
	College	51	14.8
	University	124	36.0
	Master / PhD	97	28.2
The field of education	Tourism and hospitality	71	20.6
	Economy, law, management	28	8.1
	Technology, agriculture, chemistry	148	43.0
	Other	97	28.2

Source: Authors' processing

The largest share of respondents is employed in accommodation facilities (32.6%) and food and beverage facilities (29.4%), while 12.8% work in travel agencies and 25.3% in educational institutions. Regarding job position, the largest proportion perform operational tasks (30.8%), followed by senior management (24.7%) and education (25.3%), while the smallest share work in

operational management (19.2%). Concerning length of service, the largest share of respondents have 6–15 years of experience in tourism and hospitality (32.6%), followed by those with 16–30 years (30.2%); 25.9% have up to 5 years of service, and 11.3% have more than 31 years of experience (Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of respondents' employment characteristics

Variable	Category	N	%
Job placement	Tourist agency/organization	44	12.8
	Hospitality facility for accommodation	112	32.6
	Hospitality facility for food and drinks	101	29.4
	Educational institution in the field of tourism and hospitality	87	25.3

Table 2. Continued

Variable	Category	N	%
Job position	Operational jobs (receptionist, tour guide, hostess, cook, waiter, sommelier, bartender, etc.)	106	30.8
	Operational management (front office manager, restaurant manager, executive chef, etc.)	66	19.2
	Senior management (director, owner, etc.)	85	24.7
	Education (teacher, professor, practitioner, etc.)	87	25.3
Length of employment in tourism and hospitality			
	Up to 5 years	89	25.9
	6–15 years	112	32.6
	16–30 years	104	30.2
	31 year and more	39	11.3

Source: Authors' processing

4. Research results

4.1. Descriptive statistical analysis

The first research question asked: How do tourism employees perceive local gastronomy within tourism events in the context of tourism development? Descriptive statistics indicate that respondents generally rate the importance of gastronomy for tourism and regional development positively. The highest-rated items were that local gastronomic authenticity significantly contributes to the development of hospitality and tourism (Mean = 4.27)

and that development of the local gastronomic offer creates new jobs in hospitality and tourism (Mean = 4.18). Perceptions of tourists' willingness to pay more for authentic food also show high mean values (Mean = 4.15). Lower ratings were given to the statements that visitors to gastronomic events have the opportunity to participate in the preparation of traditional dishes (Mean = 3.31) and that the region is recognizable for its unique gastronomic tradition and culture (Mean = 3.69), indicating greater variability in attitudes. Overall, the results point to consistently positive perceptions of gastronomy as an important cultural, tourism and economic resource.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of variables used in the factor analysis

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
S1 The region is recognizable for its unique gastronomic tradition and culture.	3.68	0.936
S2 The specific dishes and drinks of the region stand out with their distinctive flavors and original recipes.	4.00	0.985
S3 Local gastronomic authenticity contributes significantly to the development of hospitality and tourism.	4.27	0.877
S4 The preparation of traditional dishes is based exclusively on local ingredients.	3.69	1.101
S5 The cultural and gastronomic heritage of the region is maintained through tourism and hospitality.	3.91	1.096
S6 Gastronomic events in the region successfully present local specialties to tourists.	3.64	1.155
S7 Holding gastronomic events contributes to the recognition and branding of local cuisine.	4.12	0.940
S8 Tourists get to know the cultural and culinary heritage of the region through gastronomic events.	3.98	1.014
S9 The presentation of domestic products at these events encourages the principles of sustainable development.	3.87	0.938
S10 Visitors to these events have the opportunity to participate in the preparation of traditional dishes.	3.31	1.130
S11 The gastronomic identity of the region has a positive effect on the economic development of catering facilities.	4.05	0.909
S12 The development of the local gastronomic offer creates new jobs in catering and tourism.	4.18	0.727
S13 Tourists are often willing to pay a higher price for authentic and local food.	4.15	0.885
S14 Creating and promoting a gastronomic identity improves the economic opportunities of all participants in the food chain.	4.12	0.758
S15 The development of gastronomy contributes to the sustainability of the economic development of the region.	4.06	0.898

Source: Authors' processing

Prior to the factor analysis, the suitability of the data was tested using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity. The obtained KMO value of 0.82 substantially exceeds the recommended minimum threshold of 0.60 (Hair et al., 2006), indicating the adequacy of factor analysis for the set of variables. The appropriateness of the procedure is further supported by Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p < 0.05$), which indicates statistically significant intercorrelations among variables. Examination of the correlation matrix showed a sufficient number of coefficients exceeding 0.30 and a substantial number of statistically significant correlations, further confirming suitability of the data for factor extraction.

4.2. Exploratory factor analysis

The second research question asked: Which dimensions characterize tourism employees' perception of the importance of local gastronomy within tourism events in the context of tourism development? To answer this, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted using Principal Axis Factoring (PAF), appropriate for identifying latent constructs and not based on the maximum variance assumption of PCA. Oblimin rotation was applied because the dimensions were expected to be correlated and socio cultural, economic and sustainability aspects are not independent. Based on parallel analysis

and the eigenvalue greater than one criterion ($\lambda > 1$), three factors were extracted, which together explain 52% of the total variance. Unlike some studies, the loading threshold

was not rigidly set at 0.50; all items were retained due to their theoretical relevance and contribution to the constructs, taking cross loadings into account (Table 4).

Table 4. Factor loadings after Oblimin rotation

Statement	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
S1 The region is recognizable for its unique gastronomic tradition and culture.	—	0.630	—
S2 The specific dishes and drinks of the region stand out with their distinctive flavors and original recipes.	—	0.472	—
S3 Local gastronomic authenticity contributes significantly to the development of hospitality and tourism.	—	0.758	—
S4 The preparation of traditional dishes is based exclusively on local ingredients.	—	0.623	0.240
S5 The cultural and gastronomic heritage of the region is maintained through tourism and hospitality.	—	0.697	—
S6 Gastronomic events in the region successfully present local specialties to tourists.	0.724	−0.144	0.144
S7 Holding gastronomic events contributes to the recognition and branding of local cuisine.	0.808	−0.047	0.093
S8 Tourists get to know the cultural and culinary heritage of the region through gastronomic events.	0.818	0.121	−0.036
S9 The presentation of domestic products at these events encourages the principles of sustainable development.	0.543	0.182	0.058
S10 Visitors to these events have the opportunity to participate in the preparation of traditional dishes.	−0.081	0.126	0.375
S11 The gastronomic identity of the region has a positive effect on the economic development of catering facilities.	0.309	−0.089	0.691
S12 The development of the local gastronomic offer creates new jobs in catering and tourism.	0.190	−0.157	0.724
S13 Tourists are often willing to pay a higher price for authentic and local food.	0.399	0.092	0.182
S14 Creating and promoting a gastronomic identity improves the economic opportunities of all participants in the food chain.	0.200	0.047	0.637
S15 The development of gastronomy contributes to the sustainability of the economic development of the region.	0.393	0.111	0.300

Source: Authors' processing

Based on the results shown in Table 4, three interrelated factors were identified that reflect the key dimensions of respondents' attitudes toward gastronomic identity and its role in tourism events and regional development. The factor structure shows a clear and theoretically consistent organization of items; all were retained in the model despite some loadings below the recommended threshold because of their conceptual importance.

The first factor comprises items S6–S9 and can be defined as the Event–Promotional dimension. This factor covers perceptions about the role of gastronomic events in presenting local specialties, strengthening the region's brand, and promoting sustainable development. The highest loading is for the item "Through gastronomic events, tourists learn about the region's cultural and culinary heritage" (S8, loading = 0.818), confirming the central role of events in this construct.

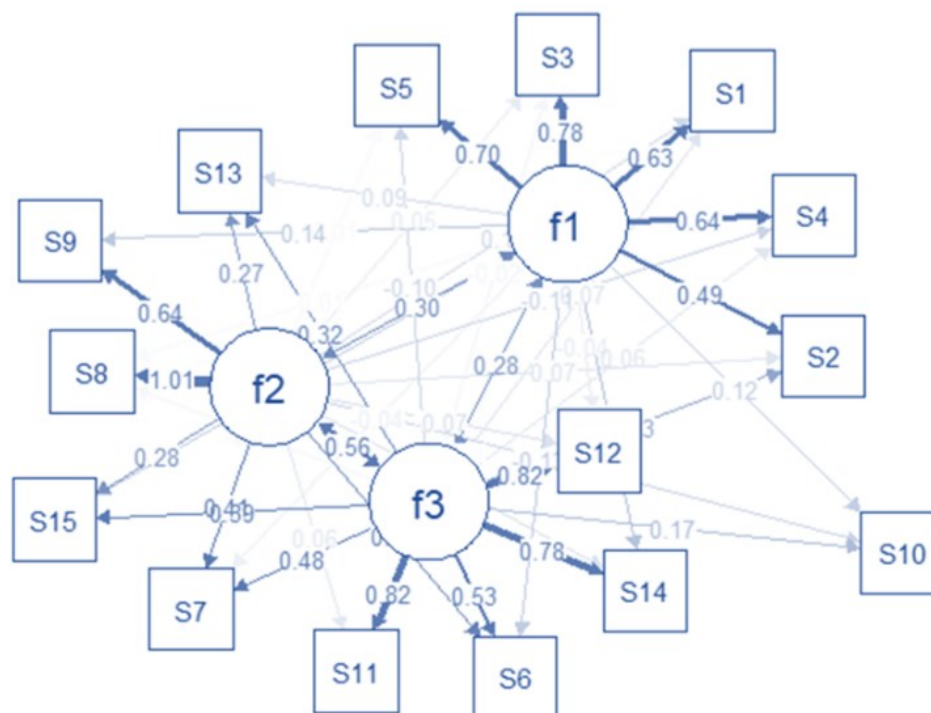
The second factor includes items S1–S5 and represents a clearly defined Gastronomic Authenticity dimension. This factor reflects respondents' perceptions of traditional recipes, local ingredients, cultural heritage, and the uniqueness of the region's gastronomy. The largest contribution to this factor is the statement "Local gastronomic authenticity significantly contributes to the development of hospitality and tourism" (S3, loading = 0.758), confirming that food authenticity is seen as a key element of the tourism offer and regional identity.

The third factor comprises items S10–S15 and represents the Economic–Development dimension of gastronomy, emphasizing gastronomy's contribution to local economic growth, job creation, and added value in tourism. The highest loading was for the statement "Development of the local gastronomic offer creates new jobs in hospitality and tourism" (S12, loading = 0.724), indicating the central economic significance of gastronomy for local development.

Cronbach's alpha values for the three factors (0.849, 0.826 and 0.780) indicate good to very good internal consistency, confirming the reliability of the identified constructs.

4.3. Exploratory structural equation

Modeling (ESEM) ESEM results indicated a satisfactory structure and stability of the factor solution. Although some indices did not reach the strictest recommended cutoffs, the overall model can be considered adequate in the context of social research, particularly given the presence of cross loadings and construct complexity. Fit indices ($\chi^2 = 463.025$, $df = 63$, $\chi^2/df = 7.35$, CFI = 0.844, RMSEA = 0.136) point to moderate model fit with the data, acceptable within an ESEM approach that aims for more flexible modeling of latent structures. The results support the existence of three latent factors and confirm that the measurement is grounded in theoretical assumptions. The three factor ESEM model is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Graphic representation of the three factor ESEM model

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the ESEM analysis

The ESEM diagram (Figure 2) provides a clear view of the structure of relationships between observed items and latent factors. Visually, items are consistently grouped around the three identified factors, with primary loadings clearly dominant — items S6–S9 most strongly saturate the first factor, S1–S5 the second, and S11–S14 predominantly load on the third factor. This pattern confirms the stability of the three factor solution identified by the preceding EFA. The diagram also shows presence of minor cross loadings, notably for items S4, S6, S7 and S10, which is methodologically expected in the ESEM approach. Such cross loadings do not undermine the factor structure but indicate that some items reflect multiple aspects of the analyzed phenomenon.

4.4. Logistic regression

The third research question asked: Which factors significantly predict tourism employees' view that local gastronomy within tourism events constitutes a basis for Montenegro's tourism development? To investigate which factors influence whether respondents consider Montenegro's gastronomy a basis for tourism development (0 = No, 1 = Yes), binary logistic regression was applied. The model included respondents' sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age, education

level, field of education, place of residence, workplace location and job position) and factor scores obtained from the ESEM analysis (socio cultural, food authenticity and economic factors). The model was statistically significant (Omnibus $\chi^2 = 83.851$; $df = 19$; $p < 0.001$), indicating that the included variables jointly contribute to predicting the dependent variable. The Hosmer–Lemeshow test ($\chi^2 = 12.256$; $p = 0.140$) indicated good model fit to the data, i.e., no statistically significant difference between observed and expected frequencies.

The model's classification accuracy was 79.9%. Sensitivity was high (94.4%), meaning the model correctly identified respondents who believe gastronomy is a basis for tourism event development. Specificity was lower (41.5%), which is expected when one outcome category ("Yes") predominates in the sample. Discriminative ability assessed by ROC analysis yielded area under the curve $AUC = 0.795$, indicating good capability of the model to distinguish between respondents who consider gastronomy a basis for tourism development and those who do not.

The classification table (Table 5) and logistic regression results (Table 6) are presented below, followed by detailed interpretation of statistically significant predictors.

Table 5. Confusion matrix

Observed	Predicted: 1 (Yes)	Predicted: 2 (No)	Percentage Correct
1 (Yes)	236	14	94.4
2 (No)	55	39	41.5
Overall Percentage			79.9

Source: Authors' processing

Table 6. Logistic regression results

Variables	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% CI for Exp(B)
Gender (Male)	0.671	0.294	5.194	1	0.023	1.956	1.098 – 3.481
Age	—	—	17.242	3	0.000	—	—
Up to 29	0.137	0.555	0.061	1	0.804	1.147	0.387 – 3.403
30–39	0.880	0.552	2.539	1	0.111	2.410	0.817 – 7.112
40–49	1.626	0.488	11.104	1	0.001	5.084	1.954 – 13.231
Place of residence (urban)	0.089	0.324	0.075	1	0.785	1.093	0.579 – 2.061
Level of education	—	—	0.958	3	0.811	—	—
High school	–0.544	0.563	0.932	1	0.334	0.580	0.192 – 1.751
College	–0.225	0.538	0.175	1	0.676	0.798	0.278 – 2.293
University	–0.130	0.394	0.110	1	0.741	0.878	0.406 – 1.900
Area of education	—	—	11.263	3	0.010	—	—
Tourism and hospitality	0.302	0.441	0.468	1	0.494	1.352	0.570 – 3.209
Economy, law, management	2.035	0.633	10.344	1	0.001	7.649	2.214 – 26.428
Technology, agriculture, chemistry	0.145	0.392	0.136	1	0.712	1.156	0.536 – 2.491
Job placement	—	—	8.527	3	0.036	—	—
Touristic agency / organization	1.274	0.592	4.630	1	0.031	3.576	1.120 – 11.415
Hospitality facility for accommodation services	0.773	0.498	2.408	1	0.121	2.167	0.816 – 5.756
Hospitality facility for food and beverage services	1.535	0.571	7.236	1	0.007	4.643	1.517 – 14.212
Job position	—	—	9.492	2	0.009	—	—
Operational jobs	–1.575	0.514	9.397	1	0.002	0.207	0.076 – 0.567
Operational management	–0.662	0.457	2.104	1	0.147	0.516	0.211 – 1.262
Event -promotional dimension	–0.297	0.196	2.289	1	0.130	0.743	0.506 – 1.092
Gastronomic authenticity dimension	0.550	0.230	5.731	1	0.017	1.733	1.104 – 2.720
Economic - development dimension	0.514	0.249	4.253	1	0.039	1.672	1.026 – 2.724
Constant	–2.652	0.661	16.107	1	0.000	0.070	—

Note: Due to complete overlap between the “Education” job-position category and employment in an educational institution, one parameter was redundant when both job placement and job position were included in the model. Consequently, SPSS estimated two independent contrasts for job position (df = 2).

Source: Authors’ processing

Based on the results shown in Table 6, the logistic regression identified several statistically significant predictors of respondents’ attitudes about whether Montenegro’s gastronomy constitutes a basis for tourism development. First, respondent gender was a significant predictor ($B = 0.671$; $p = 0.023$), with men being more likely than women to perceive gastronomy as a foundation for tourism development ($OR = 1.96$; 95% CI [1.10–3.48]). Within the age variable, a significant effect was observed for the 40–49 age category ($B = 1.626$; $p = 0.001$). The odds ratio ($OR = 5.08$) indicates that respondents in middle age are substantially more likely than the reference group (50+) to consider gastronomy an important basis for tourism development. Other age categories showed no significant effect. Field of education had a significant overall effect ($\chi^2 = 11.263$; $p = 0.010$). Notably, respondents educated in economics, law and management were nearly 7.6 times more likely than the reference field to recognize gastronomic potential ($OR = 7.65$; 95% CI [2.21–26.43]; $p = 0.001$). Other education fields did not show statistically significant contributions. Type of workplace was also a significant predictor ($\chi^2 = 8.527$; $p = 0.036$). Respondents employed in travel agencies ($OR = 3.58$; $p = 0.031$) and in food and beverage establishments ($OR = 4.64$; $p = 0.007$) had significantly higher odds of viewing gastronomy as a key developmental element compared with the reference workplace category. Job position also contributed significantly to the model ($Wald = 9.492$; $df = 2$; $p = 0.009$). Among the estimated contrasts, respondents employed in operational jobs showed significantly lower

odds of perceiving gastronomy as a basis for tourism development compared with the reference category ($B = -1.575$; $p = 0.002$; $OR = 0.207$; 95% CI [0.076–0.567]). The effect for operational management was not statistically significant ($B = -0.662$; $p = 0.147$; $OR = 0.516$; 95% CI [0.211–1.262]).

Three perceptual dimensions derived from factor analysis were included to test whether respondents’ attitudes toward gastronomy affect the probability of recognizing Montenegro’s gastronomy as a basis for tourism development. The first dimension, Event - Promotional, was not a statistically significant predictor ($B = -0.297$; $p = 0.130$). Although the coefficient is negative—suggesting that respondents who value the promotional role of gastronomic events slightly less often give a positive response—this relationship is not statistically confirmed ($OR = 0.743$; 95% CI [0.506–1.092]). The second dimension, Gastronomic Authenticity, was a significant predictor ($B = 0.550$; $p = 0.017$). With $OR = 1.577$ (95% CI [1.368–1.905]), a one unit increase in perceived authenticity of local food raises the odds of a positive response by 57.7%. This confirms that respondents strongly associate authentic gastronomic offerings with tourism development, highlighting local identity, traditional recipes and culinary distinctiveness as strategic assets. The third dimension, Economic–Development significance of gastronomy, also showed a significant positive effect ($B = 0.514$; $p = 0.039$). The odds ratio ($OR = 1.672$; 95% CI [1.026–2.724]) indicates that respondents who more strongly recognize gastronomy’s

economic contribution are significantly more likely to view gastronomy as a fundamental element of tourism development. Respondents clearly perceive the economic dimension as a key determinant of gastronomy's role in tourism.

5. Discussion of results

5.1. Interpretation and comparison of the results

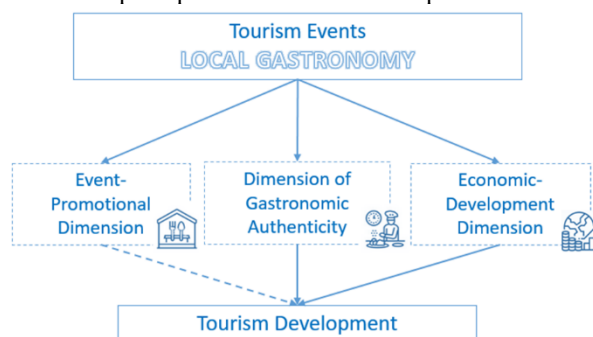
The study reveals a consistently positive perception among Montenegro's tourism employees regarding the importance of local gastronomy within tourism events and regional development. Respondents clearly recognize the contribution of gastronomic authenticity to tourism and hospitality development and its potential to generate new jobs. These findings indicate that employees perceive gastronomy as a development resource with concrete economic implications, not merely as a supplementary element of the tourism offer. Although gastronomy is not perceived as the primary motive for tourist arrivals, its role in enhancing the destination experience and reinforcing regional identity is well recognized. These results align with Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2019), who note that local gastronomy is an important differentiation element but rarely a standalone primary motive for travel—consistent with its role as a component of tourism events in this study. Sthapit et al. (2019) similarly emphasizes that perceived food authenticity significantly contributes to satisfaction and overall destination experience, consistent with our findings. In the regional development context, Ellis et al. (2018) highlights that gastronomic heritage plays an important part in valorizing local resources, confirming the developmental dimension identified by respondents. On this basis, the first hypothesis (H1) that tourism employees have a positive perception of the importance of local gastronomy within tourism events in the context of regional tourism development—was confirmed.

The study clearly differentiates perception dimensions: Event - Promotional, Gastronomic Authenticity, and Economic-Development. This structure confirms the multidimensionality of employees' perceptions, viewing gastronomy simultaneously through promotional, identity and developmental lenses. Authenticity is especially prominent as a symbolic and cultural resource, while the economic dimension reflects perception of tangible development effects (Figure 3). The three-dimensional structure corresponds with models by Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2019), which conceptualize gastronomy through experiential, cultural and economic dimensions. Ellis et al. (2018) similarly argues that food in tourism must be approached within an integrated framework of cultural, market and development factors, corroborating the multidimensionality of our findings. Accordingly, the second hypothesis (H2) that employees' perceptions are characterized by multiple distinct dimensions—was confirmed.

The research shows that employees' attitudes about gastronomy as a basis for tourism development depend on multiple predictors, notably food authenticity and the

economic-development dimension, while the event promotional dimension had no significant effect. Beyond perceptual factors, demographic and organizational characteristics—such as age group, job position and organization type—play significant roles. These findings suggest that developmental beliefs about gastronomy are not universal but conditioned by a combination of professional context and value perception of authenticity and economic effects. This result aligns with Sthapit et al. (2019), who emphasizes that perceived authenticity more strongly influences perceived destination value than promotional activities alone. Okumus et al. (2018) also note that economic perceptions significantly shape positive employee attitudes toward gastronomy. Regarding demographic variables, Zhang et al. (2019) confirm that professional position and experience shape perceptions of gastronomy's strategic importance in tourism. Based on these findings, the third hypothesis (H3) that employees' attitudes about the importance of local gastronomy within tourism events as a basis for tourism development depend on multiple predictors—was confirmed.

Figure 3. Conceptual model of the influence of local-gastronomy-based tourism-event dimensions on perception of tourism development



Source: Authors' elaboration

5.2. Importance and implications of the results

5.2.1. Theoretical implications

The findings contribute to theoretical understanding of local gastronomy's role within tourism events by confirming that gastronomy is a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing identity, promotional and developmental aspects. This extends existing gastronomic tourism literature, emphasizing that local food should not be considered solely as part of the tourist experience but as a strategic resource in destination differentiation. A particular theoretical contribution is the affirmation of authenticity as a key component of destination identity: food authenticity functions as symbolic capital that strengthens perceptions of competitiveness and long-term development. This underlines the importance of an integrated approach connecting cultural resources, tourism events and development processes. Additionally, the study contributes to understanding tourism employees' role as relevant actors in valorizing local resources; their perceptions serve as important indicators of development potential, opening avenues for further

research linking internal organizational perspectives with destination management strategies.

5.2.2. Practical implications

The results point to the need for strategic integration of local gastronomy into planning and organizing tourism events. Event organizers and destination management organizations should systematically include local producers and authentic gastronomic products to ensure offer differentiation and strengthen the destination's market position. Emphasis should be placed on preserving authenticity and quality of local products, since these elements underpin perceived competitiveness. Development of gastronomic events should not be purely promotional but aimed at generating long term economic effects, including stimulating local production and employment. At the public policy level, the results suggest designing development strategies that recognize gastronomy as part of a broader sustainable tourism model. Synergy between the public sector, tourism organizations and private actors can contribute to more effective valorization of local resources and more stable international positioning of the destination. In practical terms, the findings can assist event organizers and destination management organizations in defining criteria for selecting local products and producers, designing authentic gastronomic programmes, training tourism employees and assessing the economic and promotional effects of tourism events.

5.3. Limitations and recommendations

The study was conducted during a single summer tourist season and relied on a cross-sectional design and employees' self-reported views, which limits causal interpretation and the assessment of objectively measured event outcomes. As the research was not linked to specific tourism events, the findings reflect the general professional perspectives of tourism and hospitality employees rather than evaluations of individual events. In addition, the factor analyses were performed on the same sample, which may limit the generalizability of the identified factor structure.

Future research should cover different tourist seasons and specific tourism events, include objective performance indicators, and consider the perspectives of tourists, organizers, local producers and other stakeholders. Comparative studies across regions and countries could provide further insight into the influence of different cultural and institutional contexts, while validation using an independent sample would offer stronger evidence of the stability of the identified factor structure. Qualitative methods, particularly interviews with key stakeholders, could also contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of local gastronomy in tourism-event and destination development.

6. Conclusion

Based on the obtained results, local gastronomy is recognized as an important element in shaping destination

tourism identity and competitiveness through tourism events, its value extending beyond a supplementary attraction to acquire strategic significance for development. The authenticity of local food is particularly important, perceived as a key bearer of cultural identity and destination differentiation. Authentic gastronomic products and traditional recipes contribute to creating a unique tourist experience and strengthening regional distinctiveness. At the same time, local gastronomy is seen as a factor that stimulates economic activity, job creation and business improvement within the hospitality sector, thus gaining a broader development dimension. The role of tourism events lies in their capacity to combine promotional, cultural and economic functions of gastronomy, creating space for valorization of local resources and strengthening the destination's market position. However, employees' perceptions indicate that promotional function alone is insufficient unless accompanied by tangible economic effects and preservation of authenticity. This confirms that sustainable destination development requires an integrated approach linking identity, economy and strategic management of local resources.

Declaration of generative

AI in the writing process During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) did not use generative AI or AI-assisted technologies in the writing process.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia (Grant Nos. 451-03-33/2026-03/200125 and 451-03-34/2026-03/200125).

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