

Tourism pressure and gastronomy: a comparison between Italy and Croatia¹

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Abstract

Gastronomy is widely recognized as a strategic resource in destination branding and tourism marketing. While existing research has mainly focused on how food influences tourists' motivations and experience, less attention has been paid to how tourism, in turn, reshapes local culinary systems and destination identities. This paper explores how tourism pressure affects gastronomic identity and the projected destination image from the perspective of local hosts.

The study adopts a qualitative comparative approach, analyzing through 24 semi-structured interviews with chefs and restaurant owners, two Adriatic destinations characterized by different forms of tourism pressure: Venice (Italy), affected by overtourism, and Istria Region (Croatia), marked by strong seasonality and peak demand.

Findings reveal that tourism acts as both a direct and indirect driver of transformation. Directly, tourists' demand for standardized or iconic national dishes encourages menu homogenization and deviations from local traditions. Indirectly, structural constraints, such as limited availability of local ingredients, workforce erosion, and rising costs, further reshape restaurateurs' practices and identities. Nonetheless, some actors adopt resistance strategies, including market-based daily menus and collaborative networks promoting local sourcing or take the opportunity to innovate traditional dishes.

The study contributes to debates on destination identity and brand co-creation by highlighting tourists' ambivalent role in transforming local gastronomic identities.

Keywords: tourism marketing; destination image; destination projected image; overtourism

Framing of the research. Gastronomy can contribute to the attractiveness of a destination, often captures tourists' attention, and diversifies tourism offerings. Thanks to its interaction with the tourism sector, it might help in the promotion of sustainable local economic development by mobilizing different professional communities and industries.

Many Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) have increasingly positioned local food as a strategic destination attribute and a distinctive tourism resource (Dixit, 2020). However, tourists' perceptions and overall satisfaction are strongly influenced by how DMOs construct, communicate, and reinforce the culinary image of a place. Such an image is not shaped solely through promotional narratives, but also through actions and initiatives, including the organization of food-related festivals and events, and, more critically, through the everyday gastronomic offerings delivered by local operators, such as cafes, restaurants, and catering services. In this stance, these actors may be considered internal stakeholders whose offerings and communicative practices directly contribute to the projection and co-construction of destination image (Stoica et al., 2022).

Most of the research on food tourism investigates how traditional food and gastronomy influence tourists' motivation and destination experience (Su et al., 2020), consistently finding that food exerts a positive effect on both. Furthermore, positive gastronomic experiences have been shown to enhance tourists' intentions to revisit a destination (Choe & Kim, 2018; Gupta & Sajjani, 2019). A further strand of research examines the relationship between food tourism and destination image by exploring the gap between projected and perceived image, generally revealing a lack of alignment between the two: the image intentionally communicated by DMOs and stakeholders (projected image) tends to diverge from the image tourists actually form (perceived image) (Wacker & Groth, 2020).

Unlike other travel activities and attractions, gastronomy is available year-round. Gastronomy can contribute to a destination's positioning and can also be conceived as a driving force behind the revival of tourism in destinations that are struggling at a critical stage of the tourist-product life cycle (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). Traditional food and cuisine have been conceptualized as one of the elements contributing to destination brand image, which is the perception of a destination in terms of its qualities and associations, usually organized by tourists in meaningful ways and held in memory (Lai et al., 2019). In recent years, especially in localities pressed by overtourism, scholars have begun to investigate the topic by inverting the perspective and considering the impact of tourism on the development, preservation, or

¹ Acknowledgement: The study was carried out within the Testeat Project (EnhanceenogasTronomy hEritage to eSTablish and Expand sustainAble Tourism) funded by the INTERREG VI Italy-Croatia CBC Programme 2021-2027, project code: ITHR0200324, CUP: H75E23000170006.

restructuring of cities' and regions' cultural heritage and its influence on specific cultural domains such as gastronomy (Ganzaroli, 2017). This argument stems from the fact that tourist hotspots are characterized by large numbers of culturally diverse visitors, who often prefer local dishes modified to suit their foreign tastes (Freire Varela, 2025; Şengül et al., 2024). At the same time, although tourists often dine out in search of new tastes and culinary experiences, they may also encounter disappointment because some offerings are a parody of the culinary destination image, or what Finkelstein (1989) calls "manufactured images".

From a consumer perspective, food experience in a destination is composed of "what is served, where it is served, and how it is served" (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014), thus the role of restaurants and how they craft their offering are pivotal in affecting tourists' perceptions and satisfaction. When a restaurant operates in a tourist context, it potentially addresses a wide range of target segments, including residents, domestic visitors, international tourists, and tourists with specific needs or preferences. As highlighted by Ganzaroli et al., (2017; 2021) analyzing restaurants' reviews, products and services' quality tend to decline over time because of the standardization of the culinary offering and the fact that most tourists are not foodies.

Various streams of literature emphasized the self-reinforcing mechanism triggered by the touristification of cities: as an effect of increasing tourist flows, they witness the crowding out of non-touristic economic activities and gentrification. Gentrification and the general redefinition of the urban fabric of the city (e.g. residential buildings devoted to short-term rentals) to fit the archetype of the contemporary global tourist "magnet" are sustained by the parallel spread of restaurants and places devoted to food preparation and consumption. Some researchers explicitly designate such a phenomenon with the term "foodification" (e.g.: Bourlessas et al., 2022; Varela, 2025). Food and beverage activities and the surrounding public spaces become stages where food cultures are represented. Such representations entail complex interactions between authentic local food experiences, revisited and adapted ones, and globalised standards (e.g. food chains and local variants of hegemonic food formats). Moreover, a destination's foodification influences the surrounding food producing sectors: what a city or an area reclaims in turns of supply will channel the production choices of neighboring enterprises and value chains.

Thus, the impact of tourist pressure on the cities and restaurants' offering is already confirmed by the literature, but despite the relevance that food plays in travel-related decisions (European Travel Commission, 2024) and in shaping a destination's image (Gupta et al., 2024), little is known about how restaurants maintain their authenticity and adhere to local culinary traditions, contributing to the projected image of the destination, especially in destinations primarily known for other attractions and push factors (Antara & Prameswari, 2018).

The aim of this paper is to capture these interplays in destinations affected by (over)tourism and document how they unfold, with a particular focus on how the structure of global tourism induces transformations and evolutions of local food systems (distribution, retail and restaurants, production of food) and how these evolutions affect the local actors' self-perceived identity and thus the projected destination image.

Purpose of the paper. Instead of analysing how food and gastronomy affect tourism perception and experience, the research presented in this paper moves from the opposite direction and delves into the role of tourism in affecting, shaping, and transforming a destination's culinary culture and identity, adopting the perspective of the host (Lai et al., 2019). In particular, our analysis considers how foodscapes –the physical, sociocultural and economic space in which people encounter meals and food–, culinary culture, identity, and gastronomy are more or less induced to transform as a result of tourists' requests and expectations. Much literature on the intersection between tourism and destinations' foodscapes (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019) has delved into the mechanisms according to which local food systems characterize destinations and contribute to their differentiation. Mass tourism, nonetheless, shows signs of reversal in the direction of such influence: the global structural characteristics of tourism address and influence the agency, and thus the identity, of destinations and their economic actors, including food producers and distributors. Touristification, in other words, might erode and transform local cultures, including those providing the frameworks on how specific economic activities (e.g. food production, restaurants) are interpreted and performed, transforming their nature and redefining professional identities, material and entrepreneurial cultures (Cheer et al., 2019). In this paper's parlance, thus, we are interested in shedding light on an under-investigated topic in previous research: are chefs, food retailers, and ultimately local foodscapes influenced by the pressures and forces of global tourism? And despite the different conditions, what are the main challenges for restaurants in enhancing and protecting their gastronomy identity?

Methodology. Our selection of the field for the empirical work was guided by the search for theoretically significant contexts. First, we aimed at identifying critical case studies of destinations targeted by high touristic pressure. To be significant, each context had to be home for elaborate, history-laden, and widely recognized food traditions, cultures, and gastronomic identities. Thus, we searched for locales hosting thick culinary cultures, rich in gastronomic heritage, and distinguished by the production of various and heterogeneous typical products used in a variety of traditional dishes and recipes. Our search took into consideration the existence of codified or consolidated cooking techniques and cultures of eating. To grasp the main foundational elements of each region's culinary and food traditions' culture, we resorted to desk research on extant literature, books, and historical accounts. Then we turned to semi-structured interviews with chefs and restaurant owners to capture if and how they were aligned with these traditions and the underlying professional identities, if and how they detached themselves from "authentic" and orthodox interpretations of these traditions, and whether such deviations were due to factors we could connect with tourism. To compare different yet culturally related

national contexts, we considered two contexts that are geographically close yet interested by tourism flows of different sizes, even if both remarkable: Venice in Italy and the Istria Region, in Croatia. The two areas have distinctive food cultures but their histories present some overlaps as the result of past political contingencies. Italy represents a particularly relevant context for the topics of this paper. Its strengths in the culinary field are widely acknowledged: in 2025, Italian cuisine was recognized by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage, further legitimizing the country's traditional food culture and reinforcing its gastronomic image. Italy is celebrated for its diverse regional cuisines, high-quality wines, and artisanal products, supported by robust local supply chains that keep high-quality ingredients at the core of culinary practices. Despite these advantages, the sector also faces important challenges, particularly in highly touristic areas. Like Italy, each region of Croatia has its own special culinary recipes, ingredients and personality. In particular, Croatia is rich in natural, cultural, and historical heritage, and it represents a cross-cultural meeting place that has also been shaped by numerous nations that have left their mark on its culinary heritage.

Among these countries, we focus on destinations (a city and a region) where gastronomy is just one of the push factors contributing to the overall destination image, rather than the most important one. Within the Croatian tourism industry, Istria Region represents one of the most important tourist destinations (Krajnović et al. 2013), playing a strategic role in the national tourism economy and in the promotion of local cuisine. Venice, likewise, is a globally renowned tourist city with a strong but often not well-renowned culinary tradition. The two destinations share flavors, recipes, and food cultures shaped by a common Adriatic history.

The elaboration of the answers to our research questions relies on 24 semi-structured interviews conducted between July and December 2024 with chefs and restaurateurs from the selected areas. Specifically, 12 interviews were carried out in 9 different towns of the Istria Region and 12 in the city of Venice (Table 1). The restaurants and taverns included in the study were selected with reference to the leading restaurant guides and rankings featured on official tourism websites for both destinations. This sampling approach was complemented by the analysis of secondary sources, including social media pages and websites of additional establishments cited in such guides and rankings but not directly interviewed, to broaden the contextual understanding of each destination's food scene.

Table 1 – The sample

<i>N</i>	<i>Destination</i>	<i>N employees</i>	<i>Years of activities</i>
1	Venice	>10	4-6
2	Venice	>10	>10
3	Venice	>10	>10
4	Venice	>10	>10
5	Venice	>10	>10
6	Venice	>10	>10
7	Venice	7-10	>10
8	Venice	7-10	>10
9	Venice	4-6	>10
10	Venice	>10	>10
11	Venice	7-10	>10
12	Venice	4-6	>10
13	Istria Region	4-6	>10
14	Istria Region	7-10	7-10
15	Istria Region	>10	>10
16	Istria Region	7-10	>10
17	Istria Region	>10	>10
18	Istria Region	>10	>10
19	Istria Region	>10	>10
20	Istria Region	>10	>10
21	Istria Region	1-3	>10
22	Istria Region	>10	>10
23	Istria Region	4-6	>10
24	Istria Region	1-3	>10

Results. *The findings confirm that touristic pressure has significantly influenced the gastronomic offering and, consequently, the image projected by local restaurants. In particular, this pressure has made it increasingly challenging for them to preserve a clear and coherent culinary identity. One of the main reasons lies in the multiplicity of tourists and culinary cultures converging in the destination. On the one hand, such diversity generates demand for simpler, more international and standardized dishes; on the other, it makes it more difficult to identify and attract those visitors who might be genuinely interested in discovering the local cuisine. Several Venetian restaurateurs emphasized that customers' requests are often oriented towards the most famous dishes of national Italian cuisine rather than local Venetian staples, without considering seasonality, nor considering the origin of ingredients: "They ask us caprese, in January". Even those who initially sought to avoid offering the most iconic dishes of Italian cuisine, reported having gradually given in to market pressure. Some restaurateurs justify this choice as a matter of customer service "if they ask me for an Italian dish and I can prepare it, I satisfy the request". The posture that emerges is one where this concession is framed as an additional service rather than a deliberate shift away from culinary identity. Others acknowledge having made compromises due to the overwhelming frequency of such requests, not to provide a service but to follow the (mass)demand. At the same time, another attitude emerging from the fields is one where actors adopt a more resistant stance aimed at preserving a clear culinary identity. This second group of operators asserts that "if customers are not interested in the local cuisine, they are free to dine elsewhere". This attitude is more evident in Venice than in the Istria Region, where foreign requests represent an opportunity too. In fact, a further strategy observed among restaurateurs involves adapting the culinary offer to meet the evolving expectations of tourists from different cultural backgrounds. Rather than preserving tradition in a static form, some operators embrace innovation as a means of broadening their appeal, introducing, as one Istrian restaurateur described it, "modern twists on traditional dishes for new audiences". This approach reflects a deliberate balance between cultural authenticity and contemporary relevance, allowing establishments to remain competitive without renouncing their gastronomic identity.*

The evolution and transformation of local cultures and identities might not just be dictated by framings of different actors, but also by structural characteristics of the local foodscape and mismatches between the size of touristic demand and the local endowment of food and availability of products. When it comes to tourism, the issue becomes particularly relevant. While some actors aim to promote local cuisine, the limited availability of certain local ingredients—especially during peak tourist season in Istria and, more persistently, in Venice—leads them to deviate from a commitment to local authenticity. Although the two geographical areas are characterized by different conditions (overtourism versus strong seasonality and peak demand), the lack of ingredients affects the culinary identity, even if some restaurants try to resist. In Venice, some restaurants seek to preserve local culinary traditions by focusing on a "menu of the day," offering dishes based on what is available at the fish and vegetable markets each morning. Similarly, one of the observed restaurants in Istria has adopted a "from the sea to the table" approach as its core strategy. In this case, the menu is created daily according to what fishermen bring in with their nets that very morning. Rather than providing a printed menu, the staff presents the evening's selection of dishes orally, as the catch of the day determines each course. A challenge for these restaurants lies in differentiating themselves within a highly competitive and crowded hospitality landscape. One strategy through which restaurateurs simultaneously embody and communicate authenticity involves the development of labels and brands explicitly linked to local ingredients and traditional food practices. Such initiatives are perceived as opportunities to reinforce the authenticity of the offer while enhancing the visibility of local products. In Venice, for instance, a notable example is the network Osti in Orto, a farm-to-table initiative established by 13 restaurateurs, whose logo appears on the menus, signaling their shared commitment to locally sourced ingredients and seasonal produce.

Both in Venice and Istria, some restaurateurs reported that they are not sufficiently supported by DMOs in promoting traditional and local dishes, nor are they adequately protected from mass, low-quality foodservice, which often relies on pre-cooked meals and appears indistinguishable from the outside creating a "mismatch between quality and price" as some interviewees in Istria highlighted. There is a need for stronger coordination between local hosts, who concretely shape the destination experience through their activities and culinary practices, and DMOs, which are responsible for ensuring coherence, strategic direction, and visibility. One interviewee in the Istria Region pointed to the limited international recognition of the destination, suggesting that greater visibility could support the development of its gastronomic heritage. At the same time, another one stated that he benefited from operating in a place "positioning also as a gastronomic destination". By contrast, several Venetian interviewees described tourism as a potential threat to local gastronomy, as visitors are more likely to request generic "Italian" dishes rather than traditional Venetian cuisine that are not promoted by the DMO. From these emerging findings, we can conclude that destination international recognition is not enough to help develop the gastronomic heritage if there is no support from the DMO.

An additional critical aspect concerns the erosion of the professional workforce in both the kitchen and the dining room. Rising living costs driven by tourism make it difficult for qualified workers to afford to live in the city, and for those who can, their quality of life is reduced. As a result, non-professional staff is increasingly employed in both back and front-desk roles. This leads to a loss of storytelling and advisory competencies that are crucial to enhancing the dining experience. The findings are particularly relevant when considering the established role of sales personnel in shaping customer decisions. Retail salespeople, as the final point of contact before a purchase decision, play a crucial role in linking the store with customers by providing information and services that support customers' problem-solving processes (Ma & Kim, 2022). This dynamic is highly transferable to the restaurant context. Moreover, compared to home consumption, restaurant settings foster greater openness to wine exploration, with variety-seeking behavior being more likely to emerge when waitstaff are able to effectively guide consumers' choices (Dodd et al., 2005). It follows that a

decline in professional service competencies deprives the establishment of a key mechanism through which it can influence decision-making, enhance perceived value, and differentiate the overall dining experience. This challenge is not yet solved by any of the interviews.

To conclude, our findings shed light on the intersection between how tourists develop the image of local food (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014; Aaltojärvi et al., 2018) and how restaurateurs craft their identity which is not only a matter of food, but a combination of tradition, place, and people. Based on these preliminary data, we can confirm that global tourism induces transformations and evolutions of local actors' self-perceived identity and thus the projected destination image. Although the two contexts present different structural conditions, several challenges are shared. In particular, the intense inflow of tourists can exert both economic and cultural pressure on the local culinary supply, prompting operators to adapt their offerings to the predominant tastes of tourists and thus changing the projected image of the gastronomy associations in the destination. Moreover, findings confirm that the true meaning of local gastronomy quality is embedded in subtle differences that are hardly visible to visitors and tourists, but self-evident to locals and hosts (Russo, 2001; Checchinato et al., 2025). In a city like Venice, where tourists constitute the primary target for a large share of bars and restaurants, operators may reduce the quality of their products while maintaining market share (Russo, 2001), as visiting consumers lack the familiarity required to detect such deterioration. In the absence of coordinated action by restaurants, agrifood firms and DMOs to preserve local ingredients, recipes, and culinary traditions — and to communicate their value effectively — opportunistic behaviors are likely to prevail. This is particularly critical given that the destination's gastronomic image is not an intrinsic property of the place, but a socially constructed outcome of its operators' choices: as the composition and orientation of the local food supply changes, so too does the projected image of the destination. Crucially, individual operators cannot be assumed to be inherently committed to safeguarding culinary heritage, especially when short-term market incentives point in the opposite direction.

Research limitations. *An important limitation of this research concerns its generalizability. The findings are based on only two specific contexts and therefore reflect the socio-cultural and culinary characteristics of these settings. The results cannot be readily extended to other countries, particularly those with very different culinary traditions and restaurant cultures. Further studies in more diverse contexts — encompassing both high tourism pressure cities and micro-destinations such as mountain areas — are needed to assess the transferability of these findings and identify potential differences. In addition, it would be useful to address this topic using alternative methods, such as network analysis, or adopting a different level of analysis, for example, that of DMOs, to better understand the relationships among local actors and how the issue is being tackled at a central level.*

Managerial implications. *While restaurateurs and other local actors actively produce and embody the gastronomic culture of a place, their efforts risk remaining fragmented if not supported by a broader destination strategy. From a marketing perspective, this challenge calls for strong and coordinated communication, both at the level of the individual restaurant and at the collective level of destination branding. In particular, collaborations among restaurant owners, chefs, and gastronomy professionals — together with local institutions — could lay the groundwork for a shared positioning strategy, identifying the recipes, ingredients, and elements of gastronomic hospitality around which the destination seeks to be recognised. Only once such a positioning is collectively defined, targeted communication efforts can be developed, aimed at educating international tourists and introducing them to the specificities of the local cuisine and foodscapes.*

In destinations where food is not the primary reason to visit, tourists are often less interested in traditional gastronomy and more attracted to standardized or “safe” consumption options (e.g., tourist menus or generic dishes rather than local specialties). The high tourist demand may therefore encourage processes of homogenization in the gastronomic offer, rather than preserving local cultural and culinary specificity. This homogenization can be further exacerbated by structural factors such as the limited availability of typical products in the local market, rising procurement and commercial costs, and competition for scarce resources (e.g., seasonal ingredients and skilled labor). In this context, standardization becomes a strategic response to market logics rather than the outcome of a shared choice.

From this perspective, several strategies emerge as potential solutions to mitigate these dynamics. First, organizing gastronomic events during the low season could help attract tourist segments that are more oriented towards cultural experiences, and strengthen the link between local products and territorial identity. Second, the creation of structured networks among producers, restaurateurs, and tourism operators can foster collaborative relationships that support the supply of typical products, facilitate knowledge sharing, and promote offerings that are more consistent with local traditions. Finally, the development of consumer education or tasting initiatives and gastronomic storytelling - that is, narrating the cultural, historical, and productive context behind each dish - can enhance perceptions of authenticity and valorize the specific identity of destinations, moving beyond the mere satisfaction of functional needs.

Originality of the paper. *This research aims at analysing how the gastronomy destination identity is constructed and then projected, taking the perspective of the host (Lai et al., 2019) and considering the role of tourists as one of the stakeholders involved in the creation of the destination identity. Our paper contributes to the debate about the meanings associated with stakeholders' involvement, brand co-creation and its benefits in the destination identity (Stoica et al.*

2022) not only considering the restaurant's point of view, but analyzing how other external stakeholders - tourists - affect a destination's offering and its projected image.

Our findings depict a situation in which, under conditions of high tourism pressure, tourists become co-creators of gastronomic identity in both direct and indirect ways. Directly, their demands contribute to reshaping local restaurants' strategies — in terms of menu composition and differentiation — and the products they offer, most notably through the progressive standardization of dishes. Indirectly, tourism pressure reduces the availability of local ingredients, thereby undermining the authenticity of the gastronomic offer, while simultaneously generating bottlenecks in the skilled workforce and accelerating residential displacement. This last dynamic is particularly consequential: residents are not passive bystanders in this process, but active bearers of culinary memory and practice whose continued presence would sustain local food culture, anchor local demand, and exert an implicit pressure on restaurateurs to maintain authentic offerings and practices. When tourism pressure displaces them, it does not merely alter the social fabric of the destination, it systematically erodes the very custodians of gastronomic identity, accelerating an irreversible drift toward cultural homogenisation and the loss of the culinary traditions that once defined the place.

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