



Research Article

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The Identification and importance of local and traditional food offered by tourist businesses in Shkodra lake area

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Abstract

The Shkodra Lake area and the region of Malësia e Madhe are known for their breathtaking natural landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and vibrant traditions. Both regions provide visitors with a unique blend of natural beauty and cultural depth, making them ideal destinations for those seeking an authentic and immersive experience in northern Albania. The focus on sustainable tourism in recent years has also led to increased efforts to promote and protect local traditions, making Shkodra Lake and Malësia e Madhe an exceptional showcase of Albania's natural and cultural treasures. This study purpose is to identify and describe the territory products in Shkodra and Malësi e Madhe municipalities as well as to explore local and traditional food products offered by tourism businesses in Shkodra lake area of Albania. Through 40 surveys with local tourism businesses, 5 focus groups with (farmers, fishermen, scientific community and employee of an international project for local development) and semi-

structured interviews with local key-actors, a variety of traditional dishes and locally sourced ingredients were identified, including Mishavinë cheese, native breed meats, traditional fish-dishes, fruit and vegetable varieties as well as herbal teas from indigenous wild plants. These offerings reflect the area's rich culinary heritage and provide a unique, authentic experience for tourists.

Findings reveal that traditional food is among the top factors influencing customer satisfaction, alongside the natural landscape. This underscores the importance of local gastronomy in attracting visitors and supporting sustainable tourism as well rural development. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the need for increased promotion from the tourist businesses, improved infrastructure, and community training to help in the showcase the traditional products effectively in both domestic and international markets. By focusing on local food, the Shkodra Lake area can strengthen its identity as a cultural and gastronomic tourism destination, benefiting both the economy and community heritage.

Keywords: Tourist businesses, local food, origin territory products, Shkodra lake, Albania.

1. Introduction

The tourism is becoming the keyword of Albania's social and economic development. According, the National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development (NSTD) (Ministry of Tourism and Environment 2019-2023), the data show the growth of tourism as one of the sectors that bring more revenue to the state budget, entrepreneurial and family budgets, with a direct contribution of 8.5% to GDP and an indirect added value of 26.2%. Also, one of specific goals of the NSTD, is the development of tourism products in Albania. This category includes a number of specific forms of tourism, such as agritourism, event and business tourism, cultural tourism (heritage, history, religion, etc.). According to the official website of the Shkoder County Council, Shkodra region is also, one of the main destinations visited by organized cultural tours. Shkodra region is an area that offers several special types of tourist attractions which are unique to the country and beyond.

In Albania, there are eleven products of origin that enhance and protect the brand 'Made in Albania', which were presented by the Albanian Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. They are "Mishavina cheese" in Bjeshke (upland) of Kelmendi, honey from Bedunica of Përmet, boiled cheese of Hot in Malësi e Madhe as well as goat cheese in the Bjeshke (upland) Rrunja, Dibër etc. These products represent not only the first certified products for geographical indications, designation of origin and guaranteed traditional specialty, but they define a part of the national tradition and identity, which makes a nation or state known in the world.

In the recent years, traditional products in Albania have started to be more and more recognized by consumers. In addition, the development of agritourism as a sustainable trend has influenced the development and promotion of traditional products, creating a natural link between agritourism, touristic farms and local producers. It is important to emphasize that, the development of local products directly affects the rural development and vice versa. Local foods can enormously enrich the tourism experience by connecting tourists with the heart and soul of a

destination. Barjolle and Vandecandelaere (2012) describe the role of local actors, as the heart of the territorial strategy to optimize their product in their zone and are thus in the center of the quality virtuous circle. This is an important role, why the motivation and mobilization of local stakeholders are essential criteria when considering the potential for development deepening their understanding of a region's social fabric while fostering pride and economic opportunity for local producers (Perito, Coderoni & Russo 2020).

Albania, specifically Shkoder district has many products of this nature, which should be identified and encouraged to be certified, since national and international registration affect the increase in their value. However, few studies investigate local/traditional products and their relationship with the rural development and tourism in Albania. This is also one of the reasons why we have chosen Shkodra (lake of Shkodra) to study territory products. Secondly, the Shkodra district is an area that offers several special types of tourist attractions that are unique to the country and beyond. Restaurants are relatively numerous (mainly in Shkodra and in the area around the lake) and so are the options to choose from. The cuisine offered is traditional, offering typical products of the area. Third, Shkodra is the main center from where the trip can start to visit the northwest of Albania. Within the city there are several historical places to visit such as the ancient Rozafa Castle, various museums, historical houses, cult monuments, etc., as well as the scenic view of Lake Shkodra (Shirokë-Zogaj-Koplik), the coastal areas (Velipoje), mountainous areas (Razëm, Tamare, Theth, Boge, Vermosh, Bjeshket e Tërbufi).

In this sense, main purpose of this article is to identify and describe the local and traditional foods in Shkodra and Malësi e Madhe municipalities as well as to explore the products offered by tourism businesses in Shkodra lake area of Albania. According to the purpose of the study, the main objectives are to identify local products that are traditional in Shkodra lake area (state of Albania), their specific characteristics related to the territory, level of promotion of those products by local businesses and the impact of local and traditional food products on touristic businesses performance.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data collection and sample

The study examines the traditional products that are produced in the area and those offered by tourism businesses in Shkodra lake area.

Quantitative and qualitative methods were used for data collection, with the main instrument being a questionnaire and 5 focus groups and semi-structured interviews with actors of interest to the study. The structured questionnaire was distributed to 40 touristic units (restaurants and agritourism) around the lake area. The questionnaire was designed on Google form and the data collection was conducted through direct interviewing. In this way, was avoided any ambiguity regarding the questions developed in the questionnaire, as well as a clear understanding of the point of view

of each interviewee.

On the other hand, the development of the questionnaire was supported by the development of the qualitative method, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with local actors such as: fishermen of the Zogaj-Shirok, fishermen of Shegan-Koplik, farmers, local community and researchers. The focus group was selected as the main method for the identification of traditional products and recipes of the area. The rationale for conducting focus groups is that they offer several advantages, (Gundumogula 2020) such as the depth of information, where group discussions can be deeper and provide more detailed information compared to other methods of research, including the reasoning of the different opinions and perceptions of the participants in the study. For this reason, the realization of focus groups helped in identifying the traditional products and traditional recipes associated with the area in Malësia e Madhe and Shkodra.

2.2 Questionnaire design

This study's questionnaire for data collection was designed in two sections. The first section gives information about the businesses like: the kind of business, the location, experience etc.

The second section gives information about traditional service provision. This section contains 18 questions, related to the purpose of the study. The questions are both closed and open, in which the respondents can further express their opinion regarding the respective questions. In this way, the authors think that the questionnaire is comprehensive and the data security is achieved. As mentioned above, the questionnaire was designed on Google form and the data collection was conducted through direct interviewing. The data collection was carried out within a period of 2 months. The face-to-face technique was applied; therefore, the interviews were conducted at the business premises. The population of this study was defined as tourist units (restaurants and agritourism), located mainly on the edge of the lake or in rural areas such as Shtoj, Zogaj, Grizhe, Gruenire, Shirok, Bajze.

The study is based on a sample of 40 tourism businesses. The selection was carried out randomly, with the condition they should be located in and near the lake area of Shkodra. In order to have agro-touristic farms within the study we enlarged the area going beyond the area of Shkodra lake shore. Data analysis included descriptive statistics.

3. Results and discussions

The demographic profile of the survey respondents is included in Table 1. The most of the respondents were restaurants (85%), and 15% were agritourism units. Regarding experience, most respondents belong to the 16-25 years in the market and the most over 26-30 years. This is an important indicator that shows the duration and development of tourist businesses in the studied area.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Survey Respondents

Respondent profile	Categories	No. of respondents	Percentage
Tourist Business	Restaurant	34	85%
	Agritourism	6	15%
The experience	under 5 years	1	2.5%
	6-15 years	7	17.5%
	16-25 years	11	27.5%
	26-30 years	21	52.5%

According, to the development of focus groups with farmers, local and scientific community, fishermen, etc., we identified the traditional products in the Shkodra lake area. All products are listed in the Tab. 2, 3 and 4 below, where there is a variety of traditional foods of the study area. It was evident that the agro-tourism units offered more traditional dishes than the businesses in the form of restaurants.

Table 2. Traditional foods in two municipalities

Area	Location details	Products
Shkodra and Malësi e Madhe Municipalities	Shkodra Lake Shore	Grilled carp
		Smoked Eels
		Carp Casserole
		Carp and fish in tiles
		Eel with rice
		Smoked Ngjuca with pomegranate
		Ducks and geese
		Mullet fish
	All area of both municipalities	Wild Trout
		"Tasqebap" (a traditional stew)
		Beans
		"Bakllava" (traditional dessert made of pies)
		Pickled Eggplant
		Yaprak" with grape leaves
		Peppers stuffed with rice
		cottage cheese
		Pork and wild goat meat
		pancakes,
		Homemade Jam
		Yogurt with honey and blueberries
		"Sultyash" (traditional dessert with rice)
		Pekmez (molasses-like syrup from mulberry specifically Kalldrun variety)
		Raki (spirits of plums, grape, cornel, etc_)
		Local and Albanian Wines

Table 3. Traditional foods in Malësi e Madhe Municipality

Area	Location details	Products
Only the municipality 'Malësi e Madhe'	Koplik/ villages (Hot, Dedaj, Bratosh etj) and in the area of Kelmend village.	"Flija" -Traditional layered dish
		Boiled Cheese
		Fig Bread
		(Traditional type of bread made with figs)
		Wild Pomegranate juice
		Cornel juice and spirits
		Local Honey
	Kelmend, Kastrati etc.	"Kryelane", "Tarhana" (Traditional Grain Dish)
		Cured Meat (Pastirma) of Beef and Sheep
	Kelmend:	"Jardun" (a traditional dish, concentrated milk)
		"Mishavinë" Cheese
	Tamarë, Selcë, Lëpushë, Vermosh, Kelmend rural area	Kaçimaku (Traditional cornmeal cooking)
		Meatballs
	Reç	Cornbread (White and yellow corn)
		Chestnut
		Goat "Reci" and Goat Meat
	Vermosh	Traditional Pork Ham (Cured meat)
		Blueberry

Table 4. Traditional foods in Shkodra Municipality

Area	Location details	Products
Only Shkodër Municipality	Shkodër city	"Omac" (a traditional dish)
	Shkodër city	"Tespixhe" (a traditional sweet)
	"Zogaj" Village	Paçamur (Bread-Based Dish)
Etc,	Etc.	Etc.

In figure 1., are shown the traditional products of the area, which are consumed by consumers and are the main product that influences the choice. According to the chart, it can be seen that the area's pickles eggplant (62.5%) have the highest percentage of customer demand in tourist businesses, followed by Crap Casserole (52.5%) and Homemade Jam (52.5%).

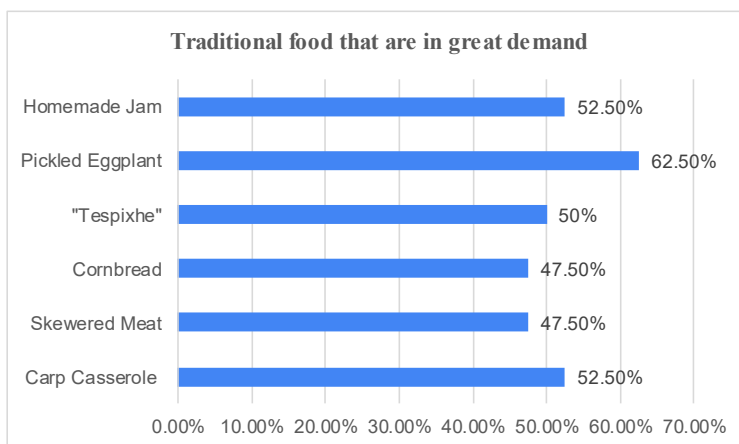


Figure 1. Traditional food that are in demand

From the data analysis, referring to the possibilities of choosing between alternatives: the product is extremely demanded, it is the main product that influences the choice; the product is often requested, influences the choice; the product has a moderate demand, it affects the choice a little; the product is offered in the menu, but it is not decisive in the choice; product not required, missing in the menu. Referring to the last alternative, the products that are missing from the menu according to Figure no. 2 are "Kacimaku" a traditional dish with corn flour, cheese, butter, nuts. This is due to the fact that today the recipe has changed and other products are added. But, on the other hand, it is unfortunate that tourist businesses do not offer and promote the traditional products and recipes of the area. Followed by "Omaç", a traditional dish which is offered for breakfast; boiled cheese, which is prepared with traditional natural ferments from the stomachs of lambs or goats and not with industrial ferments. etc. as shown in the graph above. It is important to note that these products are not in demand, but they are also missing from the business menu. Some agrotourism had different menus for local (Albanian) consumers and different ones for foreign tourists: they offered traditional dishes to foreigners while Albanians offered foreign dishes, this is because Albanian tourists prefer Italian cuisine.

Coherently, with the products illustrated above, other products of the area are: "Yaprak" with grape leaves, peppers stuffed with rice and cottage cheese, pork and wild goat meat, pancakes, seasonal wild trout, ducks and geese, carp and fish in tiles, eel with rice are traditional but are not offered by most of touristic units.

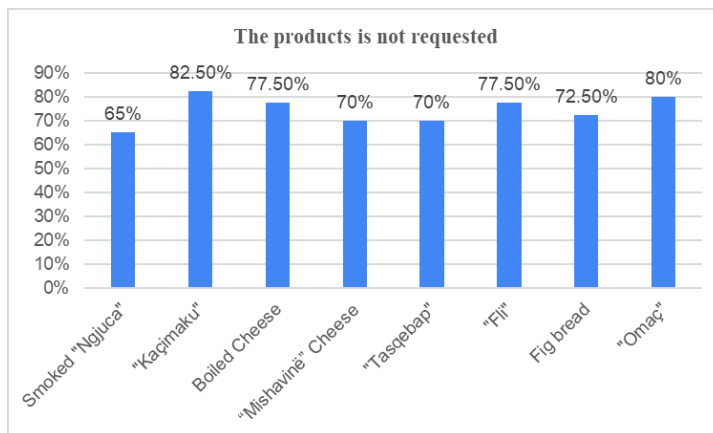


Figure 2. Traditional food that are less offered

The studied area offers a wide variety of traditional not industrialized beverages and jams such as: *Jam from mulberry, Brandy from Juniper of the area, Brandy from plums of the area, Brandy with dogwood (cornel) fruits etc.* According to the data analysis, in the Figure. 3 are shown the most traditional local and Albanian drinks that are offered and required from the consumers. On the other hand, there are the non-alcoholic drinks like: *Pomegranate Juice, Rose Syrup and Cornel Juice, which are offered mostly.*

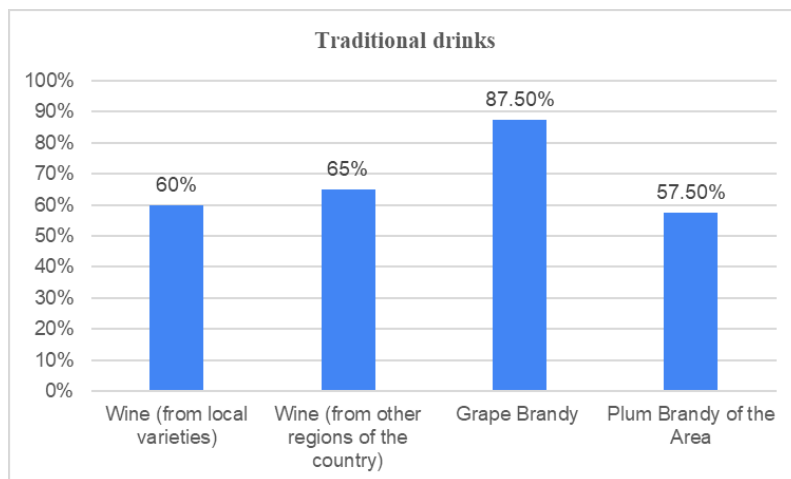


Figure 3. Traditional drinks/local Albanian products

In table 5, the autochthonous varieties of the area (vegetable) are identified, which are specified as autochthonous cultivars, mainly in isolated small villages of Shkodra municipality.

Variety/ Breed/ Species Name	Latin Name	Currently in Use	Area of Distribution/ Traditional Area
Pepper "Oblika"	<i>Capsicum annuum</i>	In use	Shkodra, specifically the Oblika area
Eggplant "Oblika"	<i>Solanum melongena</i>	In use	Shkodra and surrounding areas
Melon "Myselim"	<i>Cucumis melo</i>	In use	Shkodra region
Onion "Drishti"	<i>Allium cepa</i>	In use	Shkodra, specifically Drishti area
Cabbage "Postribe"	<i>Brassica oleracea</i>	In use	Postribe, Shkodra

Table 5. Autochthonous vegetable varieties

What is meant in Figure 4 there are some autochthonous varieties of the area. In addition to the products shown in the graph, in the analysis of the data other products of the area that are used are specified, such as: wild plants, peppers, Okra of "Oblika" and autochthonous beans (colorful mostly). In addition to the traditional products of the area, it is interesting to note that most tourist businesses offer other products or, more precisely, Albanian recipes that are not limited only in Shkodra and Malesi e Madhe such as: milk pies, "tavë dheu" and yogurt casserole, olives, beef, grilled meat, tuna risotto, pastries with whipped cream, "Pilaf" with chicken and potatoes, Beans with cured meat "Pasterma" etc.

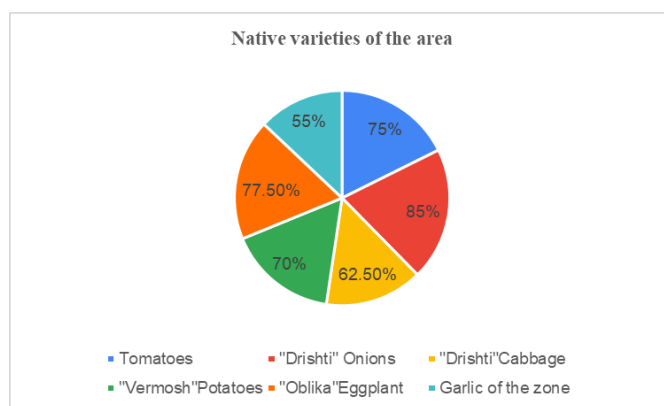


Figure 4. The use of autochthonous varieties of the area

Another aspect, important in the study area, compared to traditional dishes and products, an authentic variety of the area is fish. Table 6 identifies the traditional types of fish.

From the data analysis (questionnaires with tourist businesses), it turned out that fish-based products were offered in everyone's menu, showing that there is an

exceptionally high demand from consumers. Among these we list: Carp, Eel, Wild trout.

Table 6. Fish species and traditional practices

Table of Fish Species and Practices in the Malësia e Madhe and Shkodra Municipalities			
Species/ Practice	Description or Local Name	Currently in Use / Cultural Significance	Area of Practice / Traditional Area
Traditional Fish Species	- Krap (Carp)	Actively fished, traditional cooking	Shkodra lake
	- Ngjala (Eel)	Actively fished, culturally significant	Shkodra lake
	- Nguja (Specific Fish)	Actively fished, dried with wild pomegranate wood for preservation	Shkodra lake
	- Karas (Crucian Carp)	Rare, part of traditional cuisine	Shkodra lake
Rare/ Disappeared Species	- Blini	Rare, previously part of local tradition	Shkodra lake
	- Trofta e egër (Wild Trout)	Rare, considered a delicacy	Shkodra lake
	- Sharmaku	Rare, previously from Lake Rragami	Malësia e Madhe
	-Kubla fish	Rare	Malësia e Madhe
Traditional Recipes	- Putarka e peshkut (Fish Egg Dish)	Culturally significant, unique to the region	Shkodra lake

Tourist businesses, in addition to the traditional dishes/recipes on their menu, also offer the traditional sweets shown in the table No.7 below, as well as mainly jams with different flavors of the area's fruits, such as blueberries, wild pomegranate, figs, etc. Depending on the requests to customers they often offer non-traditional sweets of the area such as: "Trilece", and cream caramel with the aim of fulfilling all the requests of the customers.

Table. 7 Traditional/ nontraditional Sweets

Traditional Sweets		Non-traditional Sweets
"Tespixhe"	"Shendetlie"	"Trilece"
"Revani"	"Kadaif"	"Krem karamel"-Cream caramel
"Baklava"	"Hallve"	-----

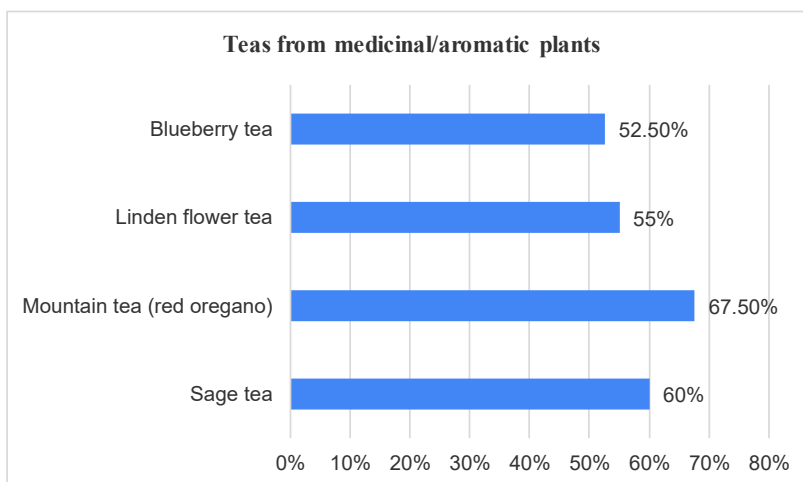


Figure 5. Providing teas from medicinal/aromatic plants of the area

Based on the percentages given in the Figure.5, it appears that tourists are offered a variety of teas prepared from local medicinal and aromatic plants, some being more preferred or offered than others. Mountain tea (red oregano) is the most offered, with 67.5%, followed by sage tea with 60%. This shows that these two types of tea are the most popular and sought after by tourists. The percentages also reflect the availability of plants in the area and the curiosity of tourists to try them. Therefore, the area is not only famous for traditional dishes and drinks. But there is also an assessment for the provision and use of teas from the well-known plants of the area.

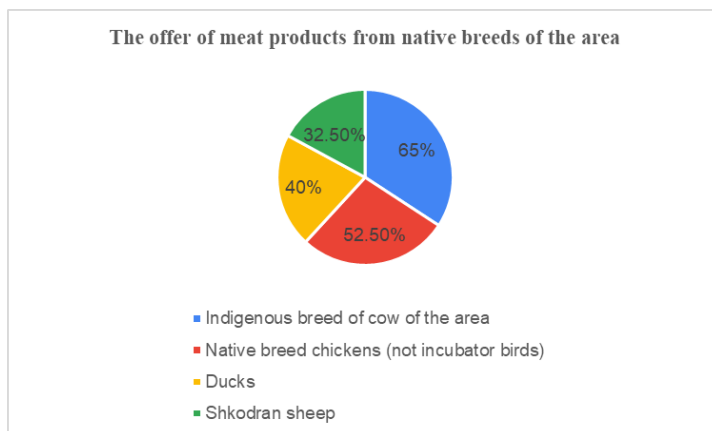


Figure 6. The offer of meat products from native breeds of the area

Based on the data presented in Figure 6, the offering of meat and dairy products from native breeds to tourists appears as follows:

Breed of cow of the area: 65% of the respondents offer products derived from this breed.

This is the highest percentage, indicating that the local cow breed is a significant source of meat and dairy products for tourists.

Native breed chickens (not incubator birds): 52.50% suggests that more than half of the respondents emphasize the use of traditional, locally raised chickens rather than those from commercial incubators.

Ducks: 40% offer duck products. While less common than cattle or chickens, duck products still play a notable role in the offerings.

Shkodran sheep: Only 32.50% offer products from the Shkodran sheep breed, making it the least frequently offered among the listed options. This suggests that either the breed is less common or less popular in the area compared to the others. In contradiction with the results, we should emphasize, that Bardhoka Sheep and Shkodra Sheep are two sheep breeds, in the Shkodra region, known for their unique qualities and characteristics. Shkodra Sheep is distinguished for its wool and exceptional traits making it an important breed in the Shkodra area. However, it has low productivity and therefore is limited interest shown from farmers and tourist businesses.

Overall, the beef of the area and game birds are also important, which are again in demand and are offered by most businesses.

Another finding from the data analysis regarding meat products from native breeds was that the White pig and Pullali Pig were not offered at all by tourism businesses, even though they are native breeds of the area. The White Pig and the Pullalli Pig, from Shkodra are two breeds that play a role in Albanian farming heritage. The White Pig is known for its characteristics but has low productivity levels which puts it at risk as an ecotype. The Pullalli Pig from Shkodra is also at risk, due to its production rates and the competition it faces from imported breeds (UNDP-GEF 2019).

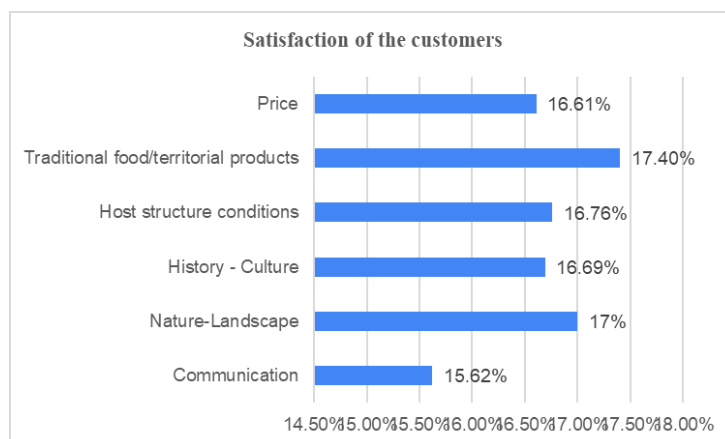


Figure 7. Assessment of customer satisfaction

Referring, the data provided in Figure 7, the perception of touristic businesses on customer satisfaction across six elements of the destination is fairly balanced,

with small differences in percentages, reflecting the importance of each element in contributing to the overall experience. Here's a breakdown of the customer satisfaction evaluation:

Traditional food/territorial products (17.40%): This aspect receives the highest satisfaction, suggesting that customers highly value the local food and products from the region, which likely play a significant role in attracting tourists for their taste and freshness (vegetable and fruits).

Nature-Landscape (17%): Natural beauty and landscapes are also highly appreciated by customers, showing that the area's environment is a key factor in their overall satisfaction.

Price (16.61%): Price appears to be a slightly less important factor but is still closely aligned with other elements, showing that affordability is considered, though it is not the top concern for most customers and the **Communication** (15.62%) receives the lowest percentage.

In summary, traditional food and the natural landscape are the top contributors to customer satisfaction, while communication seems to be the area with the most potential for enhancement. However, all factors are relatively well-regarded, indicating a generally positive customer experience.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1. Conclusions on traditional products

Traditional productions constitute an excellent opportunity for the economic development of the country. Initiatives for product patenting and investment management are important steps towards preserving traditions and promoting Albanian culture. This approach not only helps in the development of tourism, but also contributes to the strengthening of the country's cultural identity. One of the biggest achievements in the area is the patenting of "Mishavina" cheese as one of the most traditional products in the area and boiled cheese (Djathi i zim). Mishavina cheese is special for cold areas and both of them represent an important cultural heritage. The patenting process aims to protect and promote this product in the domestic market.

In the area of Shkodra and Malesia e Madhe, a variety of traditional products of the area has been identified which constitutes authentic culture in the country. Tourist businesses offer a minority of these traditional products, neglecting the promotion and preservation of the traditional culture of the area's products.

In tourist businesses, it was concluded that there is a trend in offering products from different areas (not the traditional products and recipes of the area), which are preferred and requested by consumers. This conclusion also, refers to the autochthonous breeds of the area, where it should be mentioned: the goat of the area Reç, Sheep of Shkodra and the "Pullali" pig.

The Shkodra lake area has a large variety of fish such as carp, crucian carp and eel.

Traditional recipes such as smoked carp, Crucian Carp, Eel and “Kubla” are popular and have been used for many years. Among the medicinal and aromatic plants of the area, the sage of Shkodra has a high percentage of use in Albania, which is highly demanded by the US and Turkey. Also, a broad use has mountain tea (red oregano), linden and blueberry tea. Cultivation of medicinal plants has grown in popularity due to market demand and the health benefits they provide. These plants are better suited to the new climate conditions and require less water, making them a sustainable alternative for farmers.

Chestnuts of Reçi are an important source of income and are exported abroad for chocolate production.

The indigenous animals, in Albania and especially those bred in Shkodra area embody a cultural legacy for the region. They have evolved to thrive in the climate and terrain of the area serving as an asset for fostering sustainable agricultural progress and preserving biodiversity. Detail about the features of these breeds is vital, for grasping their importance to Albanian farming industry. The preservation of the ecotypes breeds like Bardhoka and Shkodra sheeps, White and Pullali pigs have to play a role in conserving the cultural heritage of the region and fostering biodiversity while encouraging sustainable growth in agriculture as well as offer the possibility of uniqueness of the dishes prepared from them.

As a conclusion, in addition to the low production and the disappearance of many indigenous populations and varieties, there is a low awareness and lack of measures for their preservation.

All these heritages of most of traditional cuisine, autochthonous old varieties and animal breeds are not enough promoted in touristic businesses. The most important reason is because the businesses are not aware of their importance; miss information or knowledge on traditional old autochthonous varieties, breeds and recipes as well as farmers do not prefer their growth or nurture them for lower production level.

4.2 Recommendations

There is a need to increase awareness and promotion of local products in tourism. The organization of trainings and educational programs to enhance the community’s knowledge and skills in preserving and processing traditional products is another important factor for the development of the region. A study on indigenous varieties of vegetables and fruits, as well as varieties of autochthonous animals, should be carried out throughout the Shkodra region, trying to reach remote and isolated areas. For the future, promoting traditional foods, highlighting sustainable practices and providing opportunities to explore the landscape can enhance tourist satisfaction and make the area more attractive as a rural or eco-tourism destination.

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