

Abstract: This research aimed to analyze the perception of tourism stakeholders regarding the potential of gastronomy to revitalize tourism in the Mirandela region. The sample consisted of 95 stakeholders (e.g., managers, team leaders, directors, entrepreneurs) operating in the tourism sector. The study was operationalized using a qualitative methodology, and the data were analyzed using MAXQDA software. The results demonstrated that food quality, identity gastronomy, and food heritage are considered differentiating factors of the local cuisine. Additionally, it was found that diversification of tourism offerings, variety of traditional dishes, and multiplier effect are considered essential elements to enhance local gastronomy and boost tourism in the region. It was possible to ascertain that the promotion of local gastronomy as a tourist product depends on the organization of gastronomic events, preservation of culture, investment in digital marketing, and immersive experiences. Finally, it was observed that among the main measures to position the region as a gastronomic tourist destination are support from the private sector, synergies among local stakeholders, investment in infrastructure, and integration of local gastronomy with other tourism activities.

Keywords: Local Gastronomy, Regional Development, Rural Tourism, Touristic Product, Tourist Attraction, Mirandela, Portugal

Highlights

- Gastronomic experiences play a decisive role in the assessment of the trip and destination.
- Gastronomic tourism is an essential factor for regional development.
- Gastronomy stands out for the richness and quality of local agricultural products.
- Typical dishes reflect the traditional flavors and the cultural and historical identity of the region.

1. Introduction

Gastronomy and tourism exhibit an unequivocal relationship, leading travelers to be considered gastronomic tourists (Kastenholz et al., 2021; Madeira et al., 2023). In this sense, gastronomic experiences play a decisive role in the assessment of the trip and destination (Mora et al., 2021). Cordova-Buiza et al. (2021) added that gastronomy functions as an attraction that goes far beyond the consumption of food and beverages, as it is related to culture, heritage, local populations, and landscape, regardless of the purpose of the trip. Furthermore, it promotes the economic and social development of destinations, which is why gastronomic experiences are increasingly promoted as tourist attraction (Komilova et al., 2021). This reality is even more pressing in rural areas since they have less tourist demand compared to coastal destinations (Millán & De la Torre, 2022). Aware of this reality, tourism decision-makers and local actors have been taking measures to promote and leverage gastronomy in rural destinations (Madeira et al., 2023). This investigation focused on this theme and sought to understand the opinion of tourist actors – managers, team leaders, directors, event organizers, tourist promoters, winemakers and businesspeople – regarding the potential of gastronomy in a Portuguese rural region, as a revitalizing factor for the local economy.

The growth of tourism in Portugal has made it possible to introduce visitors to the Portuguese enogastronomic tradition, based on its indigenous gastronomic products and the creativity of regional cuisines, as well as its unique wines (Madeira et al., 2019; Madeira et al., 2022). In this sense, the local gastronomic and wine heritage, together with tourist attributes, are important drivers of the country's economy (Silva et al., 2018).

The municipality of Mirandela (Figure 1), with a distinctly rural character, located in the region of Trás-os-Montes, in the Northeast of Portugal (Câmara Municipal de Mirandela [CMM], 2024). The creation of

the municipality of Mirandela dates back to 1250, through the charter of King Afonso III. Territorial longevity translates into unique cultural traditions, which naturally include indigenous food products, livestock species, local cuisine, and wines. Trás-os-Montes is a land with an austere geography, with ancestral practices of hunting, pastoralism and agriculture, its own ways of cultivating, harvesting, preserving, and cooking (TMAD Gastronomy, 2024).

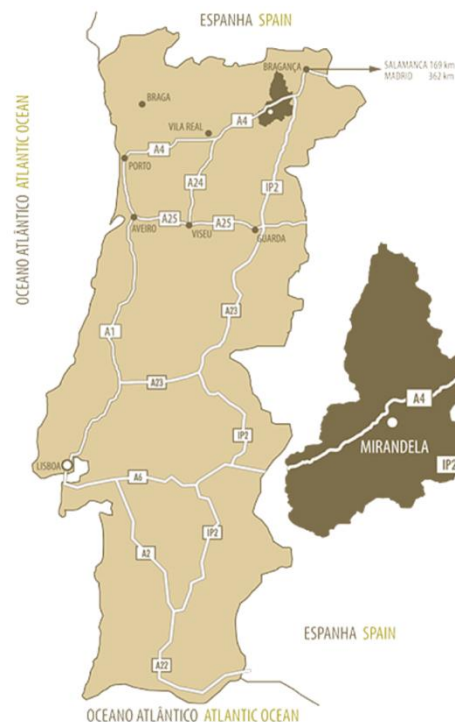


Fig 1. Mirandela location on the map of Portugal. Source: CMM, 2024

The analysis of determining factors for valorizing the gastronomy of a rural destination, such as Mirandela, is of utmost importance for various stakeholders, as it allows the identification of investment opportunities. Additionally, it contributes to maximizing return on investment (ROI) and making decisions that promote long-term sustainable development (e.g., sustainable agricultural practices, involvement of the local community). Gastronomy is one of the main attractions of rural destinations, which is why it should be valued, as it drives the local economy and job creation (Navarro-Dols & González-Pernía, 2020). Lin et al. perspective (2021) alludes that gastronomic experiences reflect the cultural and historical identity of the location, and in an increasingly competitive tourism market, it is essential to invest in valorizing gastronomy to help differentiate Mirandela from other destinations.

The highlighting of local dishes and the promotion of gastronomic culture in Mirandela encourages the development of local value chains, where farmers, food producers, chefs, and restaurants work together to provide authentic and high-quality products (Correia et al., 2020). Studying the gastronomy of Mirandela is important not only for preserving culture and tradition but also for promoting its unique cultural identity and strengthening community pride. Carvalho et al. (2021) add that by creating jobs and business opportunities within the rural community, local gastronomy also contributes to reducing unemployment rates.

The relevance of this study to the existing literature on gastronomic tourism is quite significant, as it contributes to reaffirming the inseparable relationship between gastronomy and tourism, as highlighted by Kastenholz et al. (2021) and Madeira et al. (2023). It is also important for reinforcing the studies by Mora et al. (2021), which indicate that gastronomic experiences significantly influence travelers' evaluations of their trips and destinations. Additionally, it supports the idea that gastronomy goes beyond mere food consumption, integrating with local culture, heritage, and landscapes. This study specifically examines Mirandela as a rural destination, emphasizing that gastronomy as a tourist attraction has

a significantly positive impact on the economic and social development of destinations. This research draws attention to the importance of promoting sustainable agricultural practices and community involvement, thereby reducing rural exodus. Through a detailed analysis of Mirandela's gastronomic potential, this study aims to identify investment opportunities, promote sustainable development, and differentiate the destination in an increasingly competitive tourism market. This study makes a significant contribution, both theoretically and practically.

Theoretically, it enhances the understanding of the relationship between gastronomy and tourism. Practically, it provides valuable guidelines for the economic and social promotion of rural destinations through the valorization of local gastronomy.

2. Theoretical background

Rojas-Rivas et al. (2020) refer to gastronomy as the knowledge and understanding of all aspects related to humans and what they eat. Based on this idea, gastronomy can be interpreted as the 'art of living', based on culinary knowledge and skills (Soeroso, 2020). Gastronomy possesses a hedonic component that goes beyond the necessity of human nutrition and subsistence (Akdağ & Demir, 2021). It also has a strong cultural component based on the consumption of food from a region by its people (Lin et al., 2021). Furthermore, gastronomy has been recognized by UNESCO as an essential pillar of both the tangible and intangible heritage of destinations (Romagnoli, 2019). Today, gastronomy is also considered a form of art, with the chef as the main figure, serving as both artisan and culinary creator (Madeira et al., 2022). All these arguments (hedonism, culture, heritage, and art) enhance the connection between gastronomy and tourism (Madeira et al., 2023). The relationship between tourism and local gastronomy occurs regardless of the reasons for travel, meaning that all travelers end up being gastronomic tourists (Madeira et al., 2019).

The gastronomy of a region adds value to any type of activity and has a decisive impact on the traveler's experience (Privitera et al., 2018). The relationship between gastronomy and tourism positions local restaurants, gastronomic festivals, and production sites as attractions that allow travelers to engage with the region's cuisine and indigenous food products (Fusté-Forné, 2019).

This study is based on the Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) and the Resource-Based View (RBV). RDT suggests that organizations rely on external entities to secure access to scarce and valuable resources that meet the expectations of tourists (Sorcaru et al., 2023). The dependence on these resources influences the need to form alliances and collaborations with governmental entities (e.g., municipal chambers) and other stakeholders (e.g., hotels and restaurants). However, it is crucial to develop strategies that reduce dependence on a single supplier or market (Pamukçu et al., 2023). Diversifying suppliers contributes to more sustainable growth and promotes a more stable business foundation. Alimohammadirokni et al. (2021) further state that an organization's internal resources and capabilities are the main source of competitive advantage. Consequently, the RBV uses the VRIO framework (Value, Rarity, Imitability, Organization) to evaluate resources: (i) Does the resource add value to the organization? (ii) Is the resource rare and not easily available to other organizations? (iii) Is the resource difficult for competitors to imitate? (iv) Is the organization well-positioned to exploit these resources?

Mirandela's gastronomy meets all these criteria, as it is valuable, rare, and difficult to imitate, and stakeholders can efficiently exploit this resource. In this study, both theories are utilized to understand the dynamics between gastronomic experiences and the evaluation of travel and destinations.

2.1 The local gastronomy as a tourist product

Given that food is one of the most important components of travel, it is easy to transform it not only into a cornerstone of any type of tourism but also into a tourist product (Nistor & Dezsi, 2022). As such, it has been the subject of different designations such as gastronomic tourism, culinary tourism, or gourmet tourism (Nesterchuk et al., 2022).

Gastronomic tourism can be defined as the exploration of gastronomic regions, driven by recreational and entertainment motivations, which include visits to restaurants, festivals, gastronomic events, fairs, and markets, to sample indigenous food products and local dishes (Pavlidis & Markantonatou, 2020). Building upon this premise, Visković and Komac (2021) assert that culinary and gastronomic tourism is characterized by a journey aimed at hedonistic pursuit of memorable experiences through the consumption not only of food but also beverages. Consequently, it is imperative to consider not only the gastronomic exploration of a destination but also the social and cultural context in which food is prepared, necessitating knowledge transfer (Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020). Concerning gourmet tourism, the focus lies on visiting renowned restaurants and chefs who utilize exclusive ingredients and present signature dishes that cannot be tasted elsewhere (Madeira et al., 2022). Thus, irrespective of the definition, gastronomy as a tourism product has increasingly asserted itself as a determining factor in the promotion and consolidation of tourist destinations (Çetin, 2021).

2.2 The distinctive factors of local cuisine

One of the main attractions of culinary tourism is to induce visitors to seek a destination because local food is special and unique when compared to that of other regions (Zhang et al., 2019). The quality of indigenous ingredients, culinary techniques, and the creativity of presented dishes contribute to the authenticity of regional cuisines (Millán & De la Torre, 2022). This typicality of local cuisines appeals to hedonism and food neophilia, evident characteristics in visitors who seek to explore other regions in gastronomic terms (Madeira et al., 2023). In addition to the pleasure provided by the authenticity of food, there are other components associated with culinary tourism that are increasingly valued by visitors, such as food sustainability, culture, and the food heritage of the region (Knollenberg et al., 2021).

The consumption of food at the place of origin and symbiosis with the gastronomic experience elicit a sense of place in visitors, particularly in peripheral and rural areas (Fusté-Forné, 2019). Thus, the authenticity of regional cuisines is reinforced when visitors immerse themselves into the culture and heritage of the region through the consumption of its cuisine and local ingredients (Millán & De la Torre, 2022).

2.3 Leveraging local gastronomy and tourism

Gastronomy as a tourist product is a potent resource for socio-economic development, particularly for inland, more rural, or less developed tourist destinations (Alonso & Kok, 2021). Indeed, gastronomy is one of the foremost factors influencing visitors' evaluations and, consequently, their intentions to revisit the destination (Kim et al., 2022). Local gastronomy constitutes an attraction that amalgamates authenticity, culture, history, geography, and the rural characteristics of the destination (Fusté-Forné, 2019). This leverage for local economies relies not only on visitation but also on the consumption of regionally sourced products used in the preparation of traditional dishes (Walter et al., 2022). Thus, initiatives aimed at promoting local cuisine bring forth clear economic, environmental, and social benefits to the regions (Stalmirska, 2021).

Gastronomic tourism is an essential factor for regional development due to the relationship established between local gastronomy, the territory, and its inhabitants (Fusté-Forné, 2019). Investing in gastronomic resources offers new opportunities to many regions as it reinforces the region's identity among potential tourists (Millán & De la Torre, 2022). The positive impact of the visit is driven by tasting local gastronomy, which also enhances the destination's image, whether through landscape and/or its people (Madeira et al., 2022). This awareness should be assimilated by local tourism decision-makers to promote gastronomy as a product in these destinations (Batat, 2021).

2.4 Rural areas as gastronomic tourism destinations

Tourism is an essential tool for the development of rural communities, considering their limited economic options (Star et al., 2020). In this context, Vieregge (2022) states that regional and rural communities seek to stimulate their local economy through tourism diversification. Among the activities that visitors seek when visiting the province, gastronomy-related tourism stands out, leading Millán and De la Torre (2022) to assert that gastronomy plays a significant role in regional development.

The potential of gastronomy as a factor in regional development was recognized by the European Union in 1992 (European Commission, 2013), when it established two legal instruments aimed at protecting regional foods, namely Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI). Rural tourists show a great willingness to travel many kilometers to participate in food-related activities (Dašić et al., 2020). The relationship between gastronomy and tourism in rural regions dynamizes local agricultural products, promotes job creation among the population, encourages entrepreneurship, and increases the destination's attractiveness by reinforcing the brand identity and enhancing community pride (Zhang et al., 2019). Gastronomy is also a vehicle for promoting rural areas with their history, traditions, and heritage because it allows for enogastronomic experiences in unique landscapes (Ivona, 2021). It is thus observed that the environmental, economic, and social sustainability of rural regions is increasingly dependent on gastronomy and regional cuisine (Badurina et al., 2023).

2.5 Characterization of Mirandela as an enogastronomic destination

Portuguese cuisine is characterized by its Mediterranean nature, the richness of the indigenous agricultural products, the freshness of the fish and seafood from its coast, and the native species of livestock (Charzyński et al., 2017). Furthermore, the ancestry of regional recipes, as well as exclusive and sophisticated haute cuisine dishes, shape the gastronomic appeal of each region (Rosa et al., 2023). Trás-os-Montes, which means “*behind the mountains*,” is a mountainous region in the north-east of Portugal, still isolated and with a low population density. The gastronomic relevance of Trás-os-Montes is proven by the fact that it produces 21 of the 65 traditional Portuguese products certified as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), such as native breeds Barrosã, Mirandesa, Maronesa, Arouquesa, Barroso kids, or the Terrincho cheese (Marques & Marques, 2017; Visit Portugal, 2024). Reflecting this richness of autochthonous cattle species, meat is the ingredient that stands out in local dishes, such as the famous *alheira* of Mirandela (smoked sausage of poultry), *rojões* (braised pork chunks), *sarrabulho* (pork rice cooked in pig blood), or the meat folar (bread stuffed with pork) manufactured using traditional manufacturing methods (Charzyński et al., 2017; Visit Portugal, 2024). Pairing the wines produced in a region with its gastronomy enhances its enogastronomic vocation (Madeira et al., 2019). In Trás-os-Montes, the richness of local gastronomy is leveraged by the centuries-old quality of the wines, whose roots date back to the Roman occupation of the region (Wines of Portugal, 2024).

Mirandela is an exceptional destination for enogastronomy. To expand and deepen its potential, it is essential to organize seasonal events such as wine and gastronomy festivals, fairs for local products, and harvest celebrations, thereby enriching the tourist experience (Matviichuk et al., 2022). Strengthening partnerships with local restaurants to offer menus harmonized with regional wines and highlighting local specialties is another effective strategy (Beltramo et al., 2024).

Innovations utilizing artificial intelligence can significantly modernize and enhance the visitor experience. Applications that provide tourists with detailed information about wineries, allow them to book visits and tastings, and suggest gastronomic pairings are valuable tools. Additionally, a mobile app offering an interactive experience, detailed information on each stage of the winemaking process, and personalized suggestions, can further enrich the visitor experience (Kalenjuk-Pivarski et al., 2023; Zvirbule et al., 2023). These initiatives not only enhance the visitor experience but also promote sustainable development and the conservation of the enogastronomic heritage of Mirandela and Trás-os-Montes. Implementing training programs for wine tourism guides, sommeliers, and chefs, focusing on the region's enogastronomic richness, would be a valuable innovation (Duleepa et al., 2023).

3. Methodology

To understand the factors that could place the Mirandela region on the map of gastronomic tourism regions, from the perspective of the region's tourism actors, interviews were conducted with various stakeholders. The importance attributed to qualitative methodology has been increasing in recent years, as it is becoming consensual that it plays a relevant role when it comes to delving into topics that are traditionally studied through methodologies anchored in the quantitative approach (Ássimos & Pinto, 2022). In this context, Niasse (2023) argues that it is essential to begin addressing gastronomic tourism from methodologies that are more sensitive to cultural context. Therefore, it was considered appropriate to resort to grounded theory to construct a theory grounded in the observed reality from the collected data. The data are analyzed to identify patterns and themes that emerge and can be used to develop a theory on how gastronomic tourism operates in a particular context (Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020).

Instead of imposing theories or pre-existing assumptions on the data, grounded theory involves the development of a theory from the data generated during the research process (Centeno et al., 2020). Thus, the data were analyzed systematically and iteratively to develop categories that were used to construct a theory based on reality to explain the phenomena under study (Makri & Neely, 2021). Considered one of the purest forms of qualitative research, grounded theory was operationalized through ten phases (Ligita et al., 2020): (i) identification of the research area considering the dynamics of gastronomic tourism in the Mirandela region; (ii) analysis of local gastronomy in its natural environment; (iii) definition of the instruments used to collect data, ensuring unbiased results; (iv) open (initial) coding to identify general categories; (v) recording observations; (vi) definition of theoretical sampling, which occurred when all categories were saturated in terms of dimensions; (vii) axial coding, which relates categories to each other and associates them according to their dimensions; (viii) conceptual coding, which integrates and refines the theory around local gastronomy; (ix) description of all research phases and processes; and (x) evaluation of the research regarding the procedures and methods used to refine the results.

According to Clarke et al. (2018), elements should not be analyzed in isolation but rather interpreted in their connection with the whole, as things only possess meaning when they are related to the situation in which they are encountered or occur. The authors argue that it does not make sense to develop a theory about something that is constantly changing, so all concepts should be continuously compared with the data that is collected.

3.1 Sample

The sample consisted of 95 tourism stakeholders aged between 31 and 67 years ($M = 47.7$; $SD = 9.7$). Table 1 describes the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants. It is worth noting that 343 emails were sent to various stakeholders in the District of Bragança (e.g., municipal councils, hotel units), but only a response rate of 27.6% was obtained.

Tab 1. Sample characterization. Source: authors' own work

Sociodemographic variables	n (%)
Sex	
Male	57 (60.0%)
Female	38 (40.0%)
Age group ($M = 47.7$, $SD = 9.7$)	
40 years old and below	27 (28.4%)
Between 41 and 50 years old	32 (33.7%)
51 years old and over	36 (37.9%)
Activity sector	
City Council	20 (21.1%)
Hotel	42 (44.2%)
Restaurant	33 (34.7%)
Position	
Manager	14 (14.7%)
Team leader	12 (12.6%)
Director	17 (17.9%)
Event organizer	15 (15.8%)
Tourism promoter	11 (11.6%)
Oenologist	11 (11.6%)
Entrepreneur	15 (15.8%)

3.2 Measure

The data were collected through a semi-structured interview consisting of four questions specifically formulated for this purpose, derived from the literature review (e.g., Fusté-Forné, 2019; Madeira et al., 2023; Millán & De la Torre, 2022; Privitera et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2019). The first question focused on the factors that differentiate the region's gastronomy (*What are the differentiating factors of local gastronomy?*). Subsequently, the aim was to understand the stakeholders' opinions regarding the potential of Mirandela's gastronomy to drive regional tourism (*How can local gastronomy help in the development of regional tourism?*). The third question focused on the strategies that contribute to promoting local gastronomy as a tourism product (*How should local gastronomy be promoted as a tourism product?*). Finally, the last question concerned the actions required for Mirandela to be considered a gastronomic tourist destination (*What is needed to put the region on the map of gastronomic tourist destinations?*).

3.3 Procedures

Interviews were conducted individually in a designated location and lasted approximately 20 minutes. All participants provided informed consent and were informed about the study's objectives and that they could withdraw at any time if they so wished. It was ensured that all guidelines of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) regarding anonymity and confidentiality would be adhered to. The data collection process took place between January and March 2024.

After data collection, the information was analyzed following the steps recommended by Bardin (2011): (i) pre-analysis, which involved organizing the content so that it could be worked on; (ii) information exploration, which allowed defining categories through a coding system and identifying recording units; and (iii) data processing and interpretation. These phases allow data reduction through two key processes: coding and categorization of the analyzed information content (Lindgren et al., 2020).

Behind these processes, there are two types of reasoning: (i) induction, aimed at coding raw data (first data reduction); and (ii) deduction, allowing testing them through a theoretical-conceptual system that underlies them. Although these mechanisms may vary and be combined in different ways, it is the presence of both that underpins the entire categorical content analysis process (Vears & Gillam, 2022). Thus, a line-by-line analysis was carried out to group the information units (initial coding). Next, axial coding was performed through the inductive analysis of the identified units. Finally, conceptual coding was carried out, with categories regrouped according to the interview script (Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020). The interview content was analyzed using MAXQDA software. This software is recommended for its ability to simplify and enhance the qualitative analysis process, from the initial organization of data to the interpretation and presentation of results. It enables detailed exploration of the collected data, identification of significant patterns, and construction of arguments based on solid evidence, contributing to the increased quality and robustness of qualitative research. Due to its rigor, this software has been used in various studies over time (e.g., Consoli, 2021; Gizzi & Rädiker, 2021; Lopezosa & Codina, 2022; Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2021).

4. Results

4.1 The distinguishing factors of local gastronomy

The respondents' answers reveal that Mirandese gastronomy stands out for the richness and quality of local agricultural products (e.g., vegetables, fruits, wine), as well as for the bovine cattle breeds and the resulting products (cheeses and meats), and also for the originality of local recipes, stemming from the region's ancestral heritage and its people. This initial coding gave rise to three intermediate categories: (i) food quality, which is associated with the characteristics of local products (agricultural and animal); (ii) identity gastronomy, which is directly related to the typical cuisine of Mirandela's recipes; and (iii) food heritage, which concerns the gastronomic traditions of the region and the dietary consumption of the populations. The identified categories substantiate stakeholders' perceptions of key differentiating factors that can be leveraged to attract tourists, affirming that the quality and authenticity of local cuisine, along with the preservation and promotion of gastronomic traditions, are perceived as critical pillars for tourism development. The responses underscore the intrinsic connection between gastronomy and tourism, emphasizing the significance of strategies that incorporate local culinary offerings as a pivotal element of the region's tourism promotion endeavors. These three categories led to the conceptual category, named: differentiating factors of local gastronomy (Table 2).

Tab 2. Differentiating factors of local gastronomy (conceptual category). Source: authors' own work

Information units	Initial encoding	Axis coding
"The quality of the local products we serve, all of them certified, ranging from indigenous cattle breeds, terrincho cheese, vegetables, fruits, to wine."	Product quality	Food quality Identity gastronomy Food heritage
	Product certification	
"The most important aspect is the quality of the endogenous products used in the preparation of the region's typical dishes."	Local products	
	Typical dishes	
"Mirandese cuisine boasts a unique and full-of-personality kitchen (...) rich in authentic and traditional flavors."	Authentic flavors	
"The use of herbs and natural seasonings, such as bay leaves, parsley, rosemary, mint, and thyme, add a special touch to the dishes, making them even more flavorful."	Traditional cuisine	
"All traditional dishes are prepared with high-quality ingredients and recipes passed down from generation to generation (...) reflecting the culture and history of the municipality of Miranda do Douro."	Quality ingredients	
	Tradition	
	History	
"Mirandese cuisine is a blend of tradition, history, and unique flavors that offers visitors an unforgettable gastronomic experience."	Unique flavors	
	Unforgettable gastronomic experience	

4.2 The local gastronomy and its impact on regional tourism development

Local gastronomy plays a pivotal role in leveraging tourism in the region, as it not only diversifies and complements the touristic offerings but also attracts more visitors and promotes the regional culture. The vast array of traditional dishes contributes to preserving tradition and showcasing the region's potential. Visitors tend to recommend typical dishes of the region to friends and family, thereby generating a multiplier effect that drives job creation and increases the economic power of the local population.

The first phase of encoding resulted in the formation of three axial categories: (i) the diversification of tourism offerings, as visitors may want to complement their gastronomic experience with other existing tourist activities in the region; (ii) the variety of traditional dishes, which attracts visitors who wish to experience new flavors and learn about local culture; and (iii) the multiplier effect, which refers to the fact that gastronomy as a tourist product is a factor in economic and social sustainability and in the dissemination of local culture and traditions. Diversifying the tourism offerings enhances the tourist experience and fosters synergies with other tourism activities, thereby augmenting the region's appeal. Emphasizing the diversity of traditional dishes strengthens the connection between gastronomy and cultural identity, while the multiplier effect underscores gastronomy's potential as a catalyst for economic and social sustainability. Consequently, promoting local gastronomy as a tourism product has emerged as a pivotal strategy for tourism development. This underscores the necessity for stakeholders to focus on gastronomic events, digital marketing, and immersive experiences to fully realize the region's tourism potential. The categories were regrouped according to the interview script and formed a conceptual category designated: local gastronomy and tourism development in the region (Table 2). These results highlight the importance of stakeholders investing in strategies that promote and enhance gastronomic

tourism, as it serves as a lure to showcase the numerous attributes of the region and elevate tourism from a broader perspective.

4.3 Promotion of local gastronomy as a tourist product

The various stakeholders mention that strategies for promoting local gastronomy as a tourist product involve creating unique and immersive experiences that showcase the region's typical dishes. Participants also emphasized the importance of organizing gastronomic events to promote local products and cuisine, as well as investing in training actions to preserve the region's culture. They also mentioned the relevance of developing advertising campaigns that highlight the uniqueness of local gastronomy, whether through social media and/or partnerships with digital influencers (Table 3).

Tab 3. Local gastronomy as a factor for tourist development of the region (conceptual category). Source: authors' own work

Information units	Initial encoding	Axis coding
<i>"Gastronomy can be regarded as a means to diversify the tourist offering, complementing other activities and attractions of the region (...) a visitor who comes to experience local cuisine in a typical restaurant of the area may also be interested in taking a boat tour along the cliffs of the Douro."</i>	Diversifies the tourist offer Complements the tourist offer Attracts more visitors Promotes the culture of the region Variety of traditional dishes Multiplier effect Promotes the potential of the region Preserves the tradition of the region	Touristic offer diversification Variety of traditional dishes Multiplier effect
<i>"(...) can help local development by attracting more visitors (...) besides gastronomy, they can experience the culture and history of the region."</i>		
<i>"(...) is one of the main attractions of the municipality of Miranda do Douro (...) it offers a wide variety of traditional dishes that reflect the cultural heritage of the region".</i>		
<i>"The typical cuisine of the region is a way to attract visitors interested in experiencing new flavors and getting to know the local culture."</i>		
<i>"It generates a multiplier effect, as visitors tend to recommend the typical dishes of the region to friends and family."</i>		
<i>"It is important for job creation and income for the local population, and it contributes to the preservation of the culture and traditions of the region."</i>		

This initial stage of encoding led to the creation of four core categories: (i) the organization of gastronomic events, which allows highlighting cultural identity, stimulating the local economy, creating memorable experiences for visitors, and increasing the region's visibility as a gastronomic destination; (ii) the preservation of culture, which resides in the ability to offer an authentic and distinctive experience that adds value, promotes local development, and preserves traditions for future generations; (iii) investment in digital marketing, which is essential for promoting local gastronomy as a tourist product, as it enables reaching a global audience, engaging tourists interactively, creating visually appealing content, and receiving real-time feedback; and (iv) providing immersive experiences, which not only attract tourists but also enrich the travel experience, promote local culture, boost the economy, and

contribute to the preservation of culinary traditions in the region. From the reorganization of the axial categories, the conceptual category entitled: promotion of local gastronomy as a tourist product was created (Table 4).

Tab 4. Promotion of local gastronomy as a tourist product (conceptual category). Source: authors' own work

<i>"As a tourism product, gastronomy attracts tourists interested in unique experiences that focus on the culinary tradition of the region."</i>	Unique gastronomic experiences	
	Preserving culture	
	Organizing gastronomic events	Organization of gastronomic events
	Investing in training actions	Preservation of culture
	Developing advertising	Investment in digital marketing
	Campaigns	
	Promoting local gastronomy	Providing immersive experiences
	Immersive gastronomic experiences	
<i>"Gastronomy reflects a centuries-old culture that must be preserved."</i>		
<i>"Stimulate the production of typical recipes through support and promotion from the municipalities that make up the region."</i>		
<i>"Organize gastronomic events such as fairs, festivals, and competitions that promote the products and typical dishes of the region."</i>		
<i>"Create quality gastronomic menus and invest in training actions that allow increasing knowledge about local gastronomy and improving the quality of service provided."</i>		
<i>"Promote local gastronomy through advertising campaigns, social networks, and partnerships with digital influencers."</i>		
<i>"Foster the development of immersive gastronomic experiences in regions that respect local recipes, culture, and tradition."</i>		

4.4 Measures to position the region as a gastronomic tourism destination

Regarding the measures necessary to position the region as a gastronomic tourist destination, participants in the study mentioned endogenous products, support from national tourism entities, and joint efforts by different stakeholders. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of investing in infrastructure and services (e.g., luxury hotels and restaurants, public transportation) and integrating gastronomy with other tourist activities (e.g., trails and hiking routes, sport fishing).

This preliminary phase of encoding resulted in the formation of four fundamental categories: (i) private sector support, which concerns the execution of actions and events related to gastronomy by various stakeholders; (ii) the combination of synergies among local actors, which is essential for positioning a region as a successful gastronomic tourism destination, providing a diversified offer, promoting local culture, driving economic development, and actively engaging the community; (iii) investment in infrastructure, which refers to the need to create and improve the transportation and road network, and revitalize hotel and catering establishments; and (iv) the integration of gastronomy with other tourist activities because it makes the region more attractive and diversified, which not only attracts more visitors but also contributes to their longer stay in the region.

From these four intermediate categories, the conceptual category was created: measures to position the region as a gastronomic tourism destination. In summary, the interviewees emphasize the need for intervention by the local government in terms of investment in infrastructure and accommodation facilities, and the need for various stakeholders to establish partnerships to become stronger. The emphasis on digital marketing underscores the necessity of adapting to contemporary paradigms in tourism promotion and leveraging advanced technological tools to engage a global audience. Immersive experiences are particularly salient, as they enhance the destination's appeal and foster enduring memories that tourists are inclined to disseminate. Strategic partnerships underscore the significance of a collaborative approach among diverse stakeholders to optimize resource allocation and amplify promotional initiatives (Table 5).

Tab 5. Measures to position the region as a gastronomic tourism destination (conceptual category). Source: authors' own work

Information units	Initial encoding	Axis coding
<i>"Valorizing endogenous products and gastronomy through commercialization by regional tourism entities and municipal councils."</i>	Valorizing endogenous products Support from national tourism entities Joint effort by different actors Investment in infrastructure and services Integrating gastronomy with other tourist activities	Private sector support Combining synergies among local actors Investment in infrastructure Integration of local gastronomy with other tourist activities
<i>"Support from national tourism entities to small municipalities in promoting their products [and] in addition to gastronomic weekends, they should annually support municipalities' presence in international events."</i>		
<i>"Encouraging collaboration among various stakeholders to create a stronger and more cohesive environment for promoting local gastronomy."</i>		
<i>"Investing in infrastructure and services that facilitate the tourist experience, such as well-signposted roads, quality accommodation, and efficient public transportation, hence the opening of the railway line is fundamental."</i>		
<i>"There is a lack of good 4 and 5-star hotels and luxury restaurants that dignify the best that is done here."</i>		
<i>"Encouraging integration with other tourist activities."</i>		
<i>"Gastronomy may be just one of the factors contributing to the choice of destination, but it is important not to overlook the importance of culture, nature, history, and leisure activities."</i>		

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The relationship between gastronomy and tourism should be utilized as a competitive advantage in terms of economic leverage for destinations and their brand (Madeira et al., 2023). The unique characteristics of the gastronomy of each region and its intrinsic value should therefore be leveraged to attract tourists, especially to rural destinations (Huete-Alcocer & Hernandez-Rojas, 2022; Millán & De la Torre, 2022). In Portugal, gastronomic tourism has been growing exponentially, based on a widespread increase in national-level visits (Cunha et al., 2019).

The actors involved in the tourism process of regions are crucial for the consolidation of gastronomy as a tourist product (Nistor & Dezsí, 2022). This study presents the perception of entrepreneurs and governance regarding the measures that should be implemented to solidify a rural region as a gastronomic destination.

The analysis of the respondents' answers reveals that Mirandese gastronomy constitutes a distinctive and highly valuable element in the region. These results are largely due to the food quality, which is intrinsically linked to the excellence of local products, both agricultural and animal. Similar conclusions were found by Correia et al. (2020), according to which the quality associated with gastronomy is strongly influenced by the excellence products produced in the region. The authenticity of the typical dishes of the region reflects the traditional flavors and the cultural and historical identity of the region (Kastenholz et al., 2021), which is passed down through generations. In the same vein, Seyitoğlu and Ivanov (2020) suggested that the focus should not only be on the gastronomic experience, as it is important to understand the social and cultural context in which food is produced. It was also found that the preservation and valorization of culinary customs are fundamental to maintain cultural identity, as evidenced in the studies of Knollenberg et al. (2021). Carvalho et al. (2021) added that in addition to the quality of food products, culinary traditions and cultural identity should also be valued.

Participants also recognize the importance of gastronomy in connection with all types of tourism (Madeira et al., 2022) and highlight the need to create routes that allow linking gastronomic products with the history and culture of each of the municipalities in the region (Millán & De la Torre, 2022). Similar to the studies by Alonso and Kok (2021), it was possible to observe that gastronomy diversifies and complements the tourist offer but also contributes to job creation and increasing the purchasing power of the local population. Following this idea, Walter et al. (2022) suggested that local gastronomy significantly influences the economic and social development of the region. In turn, Visković and Komac (2021) highlighted the importance of offering visitors an authentic and memorable experience of local cuisine. These experiences promote local gastronomy, enrich the tourist's visit, and leave them intimately connected to the culture and flavors of the region. The analysis presented shows that the study participants believe that the commitment to promoting local gastronomy as a tourist product should be made through the unique characteristics of local cuisine and the quality of products produced in the region. Furthermore, gastronomic tourists are driven by authentic experiences, based on hedonism and food neophilia, and engage in the setting where these experiences occur (Çanakçı & Birdir, 2019; Hussain et al., 2023).

The support of national tourism entities was also highlighted, indicating the importance of recognition and promotion at the national level to attract visitors to the region. Participants emphasized the need to invest in infrastructure and services to improve the tourist experience and encourage the extension of their stay in the region, as postulated by Madeira et al. (2023). Finally, there is a need to adopt a collaborative and integrated approach to develop and promote gastronomic tourism in the region (Batat, 2021). The intervention of local government and cooperation among various stakeholders are essential to maximize the region's potential as a prominent gastronomic tourist destination (Lin et al., 2021).

5.1 Theoretical and Practical Contributions

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to reinforcing the link between gastronomy and tourism, emphasizing that the gastronomic experience plays a crucial role in the overall evaluation of

the trip and the destination by tourists. It underscores the idea that the consumption of food and beverages is viewed as a cultural attraction that reflects local identity and significantly enhances the tourist experience. Furthermore, it draws stakeholders' attention to the fact that gastronomic experiences stimulate the economic and social development of destinations, especially in rural areas with low tourist demand.

From a practical perspective, this research provides valuable insights for stakeholders (e.g., public entities, entrepreneurs, tour operators) to maximize the economic, social, and cultural benefits associated with the promotion and enhancement of local gastronomy. In addition to increasing tourist attractiveness, these strategies contribute to strengthening rural communities and mitigating challenges related to unemployment and rural exodus. It also highlights the importance of investing in tourism infrastructure (e.g., hotels, quality restaurants) that supports and sustains the growth of gastronomic tourism. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of ongoing training to preserve and transmit local culinary traditions and ensure the authenticity of the gastronomic experiences offered to tourists.

This study highlights that gastronomy is not a secondary aspect of tourism but rather an essential component that can transform the economy and cultural identity of a region like Mirandela. By valorizing and promoting local gastronomy, stakeholders not only attract visitors but also contribute to sustainable development and the preservation of local traditions.

5.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The sample is not representative of all stakeholders involved in gastronomic tourism in Mirandela. Additionally, the opinions of certain groups from the local community (e.g., small farmers) were not collected. Another limitation relates to participant selection, which may have been influenced by their availability to participate in the study. Furthermore, responses may be biased or socially desirable, as participants answered based on their actions and contributions to regional development. The evaluation of gastronomic quality and stakeholder perception is inherently subjective and based on individual interpretations, which can vary significantly among interviewees and over time.

Future studies are recommended to assess the economic and social impact of local gastronomy promotion initiatives. This should encompass not only visitor numbers and job creation but also their effects on local economies. It would also be interesting to understand if sustainable agricultural practices attract tourists concerned with environmental issues. Furthermore, it is suggested to analyze the effectiveness of immersive experiences (e.g., gastronomic tours, culinary workshops, seasonal events) to understand how these experiences can be tailored to meet tourist expectations and local cultural contexts. Finally, it is considered relevant to explore how the promotion of local gastronomy influences the perception of Mirandela's cultural identity and to conduct comparative studies with other regions also investing in gastronomic tourism.

The main originality of this research lies in the fact that, to date, no study applies the methodologies presented here in the Mirandela region. Despite being considered one of the destinations with the greatest gastronomic potential, it is still "asleep" compared to other regions. The conclusions contribute to emphasizing the potential of Mirandela as a region with unique gastronomy and high-quality autochthonous products. From a management perspective, the results can be used so that the different actors involved in the gastronomic process of the Mirandela region work in partnership to revitalize gastronomic tourism as a solid product.

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