

SLOW FOOD IMAGE AND SUSTAINABLE RURAL TOURISM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SERBIA AND HUNGARY

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Abstract

Over the last couple of years, slow food has developed as a sustainable form of tourism capable of transforming rural destinations and their development. In the hustle-bustle that everyone goes through, people are constantly looking for oases of peace and ways to restart and be well, feel healthy. The paper started from the initial hypothesis H that slow food has a direct impact on the sustainable development of rural destinations, but we wanted to get information about what kind of gastronomy affects the sustainable development of rural destinations and how it happens? The research was carried out with the guests of two traditional restaurants where local, traditional cuisine is prepared and served in a traditional way—one in Hungary and the other in Vojvodina (Serbia). A total of 493 guests from these two restaurants were interviewed so as to obtain information on what influences the creation of positive slow food images. It has been concluded that slow food concretes are influenced by some attributes such as: Value for money, quality of food, quantity of dishes, variety of dishes, food presentation, and overall traditional meal experience and also the surroundings' attractiveness. High scores for these attributes confirm the positive influence of slow food on sustainable development of rural destinations.

Keywords: slow food, rural tourism, sustainable development, gastronomy, Pannonian plain

INTRODUCTION

The modern population is increasingly exposed to a constant influx of stressors (DuBois et al., 2024). Contemporary lifestyles require individuals to move quickly, yet in reality they engage in minimal physical activity while often consuming unhealthy foods, which further contributes to various illnesses (Luo et al., 2024). Considering current trends in the food manufacturing industry, it would not be surprising if, in the near future, meals were replaced by nutrient tablets designed to meet basic daily needs (Sharma et al., 2024). This alarming direction is reflected in the global rise of obesity (Wang et al., 2025) and the increasing incidence of cancer and other life-threatening diseases (Venugopal & Pechous, 2024). In response to these challenges, individuals have begun to explore alternative approaches that

promise a healthier and more balanced lifestyle, one of which is sustainable gastronomy (Yıkımlı et al., 2022; Sgroi, 2023). Sustainable gastronomy emphasizes the origin of ingredients as well as environmentally responsible production and distribution practices (Nyberg et al., 2022). Given the intensifying impacts of climate change, the rapid growth of global waste, and the accelerated depletion of natural resources, sustainability is required across all societal sectors (Batat, 2020). Gastronomy is no exception (Yıkımlı et al., 2024). Closely linked with notions of “good food,” it encompasses not only refined taste and gourmet experiences, but also the cultural dimensions reflected in local food traditions (Yilmaz & Yalcin, 2024).

A key movement advocating these principles is Slow Food—an Italian initiative promoting mindful eating, seasonal products, and reduced environmental impacts of food production, while supporting local producers and traditional practices (Hamada et al., 2024). Founded by Carlo Petrini in 1989, it encourages the preservation of traditional cooking methods and local ingredients (Reed, 2008). The movement’s philosophy integrates pleasure in eating with care for the community and the environment. Beyond culinary practice, Slow Food represents a lifestyle rooted in hedonism, health, ecology, and sustainable development (van Bommel & Spicer, 2015), standing in opposition to the values of fast food culture. Recognizing the need to slow down, reconnect with nature, and improve overall well-being, many individuals increasingly seek rural environments as places of escape and renewal. Rural tourism (Panić et al., 2024; Nastić et al., 2024) has thus emerged as a form of sustainable tourism offering leisure activities, peaceful surroundings, and authentic cultural experiences (Bojović et al., 2024). Within this context, Slow Food plays a significant role by representing sustainable gastronomy served in traditional settings, often reminiscent of ancestral ways of preparing and consuming food (Carvache-Franco et al., 2021). Slow Food imagery evokes relaxation, pleasure, and meaningful social interaction, shaped by the surrounding atmosphere and gastronomic experience (Rinaldi, 2017). Meals become celebratory moments shared among family and friends, fostering intimacy, conversation, and emotional comfort.

As a sustainable tourism model (Vujko et al., 2021; Bešić et al., 2024), rural tourism is increasingly recognized as a strategy for improving socio-economic conditions in rural destinations (Crăciun et al., 2022). Seal (2022) defines rural tourism as a set of tourism activities connecting visitors with outdoor recreation, agriculture, rural lifestyles, and local culture, including fishing and nature walks (Gao & Wu, 2017; Wijijayanti et al., 2023). Rural environments offer opportunities for rest, experimentation, and immersive experiences in local living conditions. Gastronomy—particularly Slow Food—has proven to be a key

indicator of sustainable development in rural destinations and forms an essential link between rural tourism and long-term sustainability (Addai et al., 2024).

The success of Slow Food tourism depends on implementing effective measures to support small-scale producers and family farms, which in turn enhances community empowerment and strengthens the regional economy. The empirical research was conducted with 493 respondents—diners in two sample restaurants offering exclusively traditional dishes made from local ingredients. The goal was to understand how tourists perceive and evaluate rural tourism experiences that include Slow Food. Considering similarities in geography, customs, and culinary traditions between Hungary and Serbia, the authors expect that the findings will be useful for advancing rural tourism development in Serbia. The key outcome of this research indicates that Slow Food images are shaped by tourists' perceptions of value for money, food quality, number and variety of dishes, presentation, traditional meal experience, and the attractiveness of the surrounding environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability in gastronomy encompasses criteria drawn from ecology, economics, sociology, and public health, particularly emphasizing safe and nutritionally valuable food. According to Calbi et al. (2024), ecological criteria refer to the processes used in obtaining sustainable inputs. These criteria highlight production methods that positively affect local ecosystems and natural resources (Jonsson et al., 2024). Within ecological dimensions, key activities include the use of environmentally beneficial products, adherence to animal welfare standards, and the promotion of employee awareness regarding sustainability (Aguilera & Rozzi, 2024). Desirable ecological practices further involve sourcing meat from animals raised under controlled grazing conditions, selecting fish from sustainable stocks, prioritizing seasonal ingredients, ensuring full traceability of food origins, minimizing food miles, and properly managing kitchen waste (Cheng et al., 2024). Economic sustainability, according to Sgroi (2022), is achieved when operational processes are financially viable, support local economic growth, and result in products priced reasonably for consumers (Pulina et al., 2021). Investments in energy-efficient systems are often introduced not only to support environmental goals but also to improve long-term economic performance (Papendiek et al., 2016; Stefan et al., 2021). Social sustainability focuses on integrating all stakeholders within the circular economy—from producers and distributors to hospitality providers and final consumers (Stanojević et al., 2021). Central to this approach is building trust and ensuring

complete product traceability (Chen et al., 2023). In practice, social sustainability is reflected in the preservation of cultural traditions, fair treatment of workers in terms of wages and working conditions, and ongoing education regarding food safety and sustainable gastronomic practices.

Health-related sustainability emphasizes the importance of organic food production. According to Akther et al. (2024), sustainable healthy food is often equated with organic food—products cultivated through organic farming methods as outlined by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (Anjos et al., 2020). Although definitions vary across regions, organic farming typically prioritizes resource cycling, ecological balance, and biodiversity conservation (Baker et al., 2002; Barbosa et al., 2018). Regulatory bodies restrict the use of pesticides, fertilizers, irradiation, industrial solvents, and synthetic additives. Organic products must be free of genetically modified organisms and artificial chemicals (Bergstrand, 2022). Organic animal-based products—such as certified organic eggs—must comply with animal welfare standards, including access to free-range conditions rather than battery cages (Tao et al., 2015).

The Slow Food movement represents another major contribution to sustainability in gastronomy. Founded by Carlo Petrini in Bra, Italy, in 1989, Slow Food emerged as a counter-movement to the rise of fast-food culture, symbolized at the time by the opening of the first McDonald's in Rome (Fusté-Forné & Jamal, 2020). Its philosophy is grounded in three principles: good, clean, and fair. “Good” food refers to high-quality, tasty, and healthy products that reinforce cultural and geographical identity (Jackson et al., 2023). “Clean” food emphasizes environmentally responsible production that avoids harming natural ecosystems (Chauhan & Rao, 2024). “Fair” food requires socially sustainable conditions, ensuring equitable wages and treatment for producers while maintaining reasonable prices for consumers (Martínez-Sykora et al., 2024). The Slow Food ethos integrates organoleptic quality, memory, and emotional connections to food with ethical production processes that respect both ecosystems and social relationships. Fairness includes adequate compensation for small-scale producers and equity throughout production and distribution systems. To achieve its goals, the movement promotes an alternative lifestyle that challenges the fast-paced consumer culture of modern society (Moliterni et al., 2025). By encouraging a shift in paradigms and emphasizing tradition, culture, and national identity, Slow Food has evolved into a global network—supported particularly through the Terra Madre initiative—which unites local food communities and individuals sharing the movement's ideals (Fusté-Forné & Jamal, 2020).

In the context of this study, the term “slow food image” refers to the set of cognitive, affective, and sensory impressions associated with traditional local gastronomy. This image encompasses several dimensions—perceived food quality, authenticity, traditional preparation, sensory experience, service style, and the cultural-symbolic meaning attached to dishes. These dimensions collectively shape how visitors interpret and emotionally respond to local cuisine. As emphasized in tourism literature, food functions not only as a nutritional element but also as a cultural marker that shapes visitors’ perceptions of a place (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). Research further shows that gastronomic image is constructed through the interaction of environmental cues, local ingredients, meal presentation, and personal expectations (Kim, Eves & Scarles, 2009; Sims, 2009). Accordingly, the slow food image encompasses the holistic sensory and emotional experience generated through local cuisine—how it tastes, how it is presented, and how it reflects regional identity and heritage. In this study, the slow food image is operationalized through seven (later expanded to nine) attributes measured on a five-point Likert scale, capturing visitors’ evaluations of value for money, food quality, variety, presentation, and the experiential and environmental context of the meal. In this sense, the slow food image operates as a motivational and experiential dimension that contributes to destination attractiveness and influences tourists’ evaluations and behavioral intentions. The conceptual logic underlying this framework follows a simple process: traditional gastronomic offerings and the natural environment shape visitors’ perceptions of food quality and authenticity; these perceptions influence satisfaction with the overall experience; satisfaction, in turn, strengthens support for rural destinations and contributes to sustainable tourism development. This relational structure is consistent with established models linking food-based experiences, destination image, and behavioral intentions in tourism research (Kim et al., 2009; Sims, 2009).

Agritourism represents a distinct and increasingly important form of rural tourism in which agricultural activities, traditional food production, and farm-based experiences constitute the core elements of the tourist offer. Phillip et al. (2010) define agritourism as tourism that occurs on working farms, where visitors engage with agricultural landscapes, local gastronomy, and rural culture. Owing to its reliance on short food supply chains, local ingredients, and direct interaction between producers and consumers, agritourism is widely considered one of the most sustainable models of rural tourism development (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; Vujko et al., 2025). Sustainability in agritourism is expressed economically—through diversification of farm income; socially—through preservation of cultural practices, traditional knowledge, and rural identity; and environmentally—through

promotion of ecological farming practices and reduction of transportation-related emissions (Tew & Barbieri, 2012; Cvijanović et al., 2025). Local gastronomy plays a central role: meals offered to visitors are commonly prepared from home-grown or regionally sourced ingredients, enhancing perceptions of authenticity and strengthening the connection between food, place, and identity (Recuero-Virto & Valilla Arróspide, 2024; Paunić et al., 2024). In this regard, agritourism closely aligns with the principles of the Slow Food movement, as both emphasize traditional production, high-quality local foods, and respect for ecological and cultural values. Agritourism also contributes to the preservation of rural landscapes, supports small family farms, and stimulates local economies, making it an effective strategic tool for sustainable rural development. By integrating agriculture, sustainability, and tourism, agritourism provides an essential conceptual link between local gastronomy and rural tourism practices relevant to this study.

METHODOLOGY

The research conducted for the purposes of this paper was based on the methodology previously used by Nield, Kozak and LeGrys (2000). Using a modified version of their approach, respondents were asked to rate seven attributes—value for money, food quality, number of dishes, variety of dishes, food presentation, overall traditional meal experience, and attractiveness of surroundings—on a five-point scale from one to five. The authors of this paper used these attributes to sketch the images of slow food in the perception of 493 guests. These slow food images are not only related to the taste and quality of the food itself, but arise from the entire set of circumstances that shape guests' impressions. The authors assume that it is important for guests to receive the value they expect for their money, which, in a rural environment, is often associated with the taste of food prepared “like at grandma’s house.” In fact, the attribute “value for money” contains an emotional component that is highly individual for different guests. Food quality undoubtedly refers to the impact that food has on human health and is linked to the “from field to table” concept, which implies that the guest can at any time know the origin of each ingredient that goes into a meal. To adapt the original Nield–Kozak–LeGrys (2000) scale to the context of traditional gastronomy in rural areas, a reduced and culturally adjusted set of attributes was selected. The wording of items was refined to reflect region-specific elements of slow food, and the instrument was translated and back-translated to ensure semantic and cultural equivalence. This modified version thus preserves the core evaluative structure of the original scale while strengthening its contextual relevance.

The number of dishes served to the guest is perceived as part of a traditional manner of serving food: starting with appetizers, then soup or stew, followed by the main course, salad, bread and finally dessert. The richness of the table is something common in these regions and is considered part of tradition. Visual “pictures” also affect slow food images. The manner of serving has an additional effect: waiters with a smiling face and positive attitude represent the sense of hospitality that can be felt in the regions where the research was conducted. Food and table offerings can equally be considered part of this slow food perception. A large menu with many different traditional dishes, all of high quality and very tasty, plays a major role in reinforcing the images that slow food evokes. After the method of serving food—that is, how the food is brought to the guests—other elements also matter. Ideally, the restaurant is full, guests ask for more, and leave with a smile on their face. The area surrounding the restaurant should also be arranged in a typical traditional manner, with appropriate decorations and props. At first sight, the place should clearly signal what type of food is served there. Traditional furniture and decorative elements are expected in both the interior and exterior. Music is also very important: these parts of the country are associated with tamburica and folk music performed with tamburica or accordion. Last but not least is the location of the restaurant—namely, the wider environment and atmosphere. The ambiance of a traditional restaurant should be closely linked with nature and provide an environment that facilitates relaxation and enjoyment, promotes peace and tranquility, and by its appearance fosters a good mood among guests.

The authors visited two restaurants for better representation: one located in Hungary and the other in Vojvodina (Serbia). The research was conducted over a period of more than two years, from March 2022 until September 2024. The survey, in the form of interviews, was carried out personally by the authors. Guests of these restaurants were interviewed, and the data were recorded during conversations and informal chats. The authors assumed that this approach would elicit more honest answers, given the intimate and relaxed ambiance. For each attribute, interviewees were given an explanation of what it represents and what it means, so there were no equivocal answers. The sampling approach corresponded to sequential convenience sampling, where every guest present at the time of the researchers’ visit and willing to participate was included. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no exclusion criteria were applied beyond willingness to take part. The final sample consisted of 493 participants, of whom approximately 54% were female and 46% male. The age structure ranged from 18 to 74 years, with the largest share of respondents belonging to the 30–49 age group. Around two-thirds of the participants were domestic visitors, while one-third were foreign guests, reflecting the typical composition of visitors in both study locations.

The Hungarian restaurant is located inside the Hortobágy National Park and is named Hortobágyi Csárda, while the Serbian restaurant is located within the Fruška Gora National Park and is called Banstolka. Both are situated in the Pannonian Plain; their geographical characteristics and the traditional principles of the people living there provide ample justification for claiming a strong similarity between the two. In Hungary, rural tourism is highly developed and is clearly present on the agenda of top decision-makers. In Serbia, however, rural tourism is not yet developed in accordance with its real potential and still remains below the level of possibilities. The authors thus collected information based on the scrutiny of hospitality guests' perceptions regarding slow food within the gastronomic offer and its importance, and examined whether there are differences in the offer between the two nations, given their different stages of rural tourism development. Both restaurants were treated as case-study sites, selected for their representativeness of traditional rural gastronomy rather than for statistical generalization. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted within the framework of case-based inquiry.

This study begins from the main hypothesis (H) that Slow Food represents a dimension that is associated with and may contribute to the sustainable development of rural tourism and, consequently, to the sustainable development of rural destinations. In line with the theoretical framework and the research objectives, two research questions were formulated: What type of gastronomy can sustainably develop rural areas? How does gastronomy influence sustainable rural development? Based on these questions, two sub-hypotheses were derived:

H1: Local food and beverages may support the development of rural destinations by enhancing the authenticity, attractiveness, and overall value of the gastronomic offer.

H2: Sustainable food and beverage production may contribute to the sustainable development of rural destinations by reinforcing ecological, cultural, and socio-economic sustainability.

It should be emphasized that both sub-hypotheses are examined at a micro-level through guests' perceptions, rather than through systemic or objectively measured sustainability indicators.

The main hypothesis (H) and the two subordinate hypotheses (H1 and H2) were empirically tested through evaluation of guests' perceptions across nine attributes related to the slow food experience, as well as through comparative analysis between respondents from Serbia and Hungary. It is important to note that the study examines guests' perceived sustainability impacts rather than objective environmental indicators. The focus is therefore

on subjective evaluations of ecological, cultural, and socio-economic dimensions embedded in the slow food experience.

To ensure methodological rigor, a combination of complementary statistical procedures was applied. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were computed to provide an overview of general perception patterns. Based on these results, a ranking procedure was undertaken to identify the most influential attributes shaping the slow food experience. All statistical procedures were performed in IBM SPSS Statistics 29. Given that the variables were measured on a five-point Likert scale and thus represent ordinal data, differences between the Serbian and Hungarian samples were assessed using nonparametric methods. The choice of nonparametric techniques was based on the ordinal nature of the data and the absence of normal distribution assumptions. Values in the lower part of the scale (1–2) appeared only sporadically, which explains why the majority of mean scores fall within the 3–5 range—a common pattern in hospitality satisfaction studies. Cliff’s delta (δ) was used as a robust measure of effect size to evaluate the magnitude of group differences. Additionally, Pearson’s Chi-Square tests were performed to determine whether the distribution of responses differed significantly between the two countries. Statistical significance was evaluated at the $p < 0.05$ level. This refined and methodologically consistent approach ensured the transparency, robustness, and reproducibility of all analytical procedures.

Rural Hungary

Rural tourism in Hungary began to take institutional form in 1994, when the National Rural and Agrotourism Association assumed responsibility for representing rural tourism service providers (Nemes et al., 2019). Following an organizational transformation in 2001, the National Rural and Agrotourism Association was reorganized into an umbrella association comprising 19 county-level organizations, thereby extending its operational reach throughout the entire country. Today, the Association has approximately 2,000 members (<https://www.ksh.hu>). According to rural hosts themselves, this figure is nearly three times higher than the number registered in the official statistics of the Hungarian Tourism Agency, exceeding 50% of all rural accommodation providers in the country. In 2023, the Central Statistical Office reported 71,232 rooms and 256,962 bed places in private and other accommodation establishments across Hungary (<https://www.ksh.hu>). The National Association of Rural and Agrotourism frequently uses the term “village tourism” as a synonym for the foundational and most widespread form of rural tourism (Szabó, 2006; 2011). According to Gonda and Bori (2023), demand in rural tourism is directly linked to

general motivational trends observed in contemporary tourism. Tourists increasingly seek pristine natural landscapes, clean and aesthetically pleasing environments, and experiences associated with silence, tranquillity, and “perfect” recreation. These motives highlight the attractiveness of “untouched” rural areas as appealing tourism destinations. Nemes et al. (2019) emphasize that rural tourism in Hungary is today primarily dominated by domestic visitors, who account for approximately 90% of all guests. After the millennium, when the proportion of foreign and domestic guests was nearly equal, a significant shift occurred, resulting in a predominant domestic demand.

Regarding gastronomy, Gonda and Bori (2023) note that Hungarian cuisine has roots in ancient Asiatic culinary traditions, enriched over time with Germanic, Italian, and Slavic influences. Some of the most iconic dishes include: *Gulyásleves* (Goulash Soup): A savory and aromatic dish featuring tender meat and vegetables in a richly seasoned, flavorful broth; *Pörkölt*: A dense stew typically made from meat and vegetables, characterized by the distinct taste of paprika—a hallmark of Hungarian cuisine; *Halászlé* (Hot and Spicy Fish Soup): A flavorful and spicy fish soup heavily seasoned with paprika; *Lángos* (Deep-fried Pastry): A popular street food consisting of deep-fried dough topped with garlic butter, sour cream, and cheese; *Kürtős kalács* (Nagy, 2018), internationally known as chimney cake, is a traditional Hungarian pastry prepared from a slightly sweet, yeast-leavened dough that is rolled into a long strip and wrapped around a cylindrical wooden spit. The dough is then brushed with melted butter and rolled in sugar before being baked over charcoal or in a rotisserie-style oven. During baking, the sugar caramelizes, forming a shiny, crisp, amber-colored crust. Once baked, the pastry is typically coated with additional toppings such as ground walnuts, cinnamon, cocoa powder, vanilla sugar, or shredded coconut. Contemporary commercial variants may include additional fillings or coatings such as chocolate spreads, but these are modern adaptations and not characteristic of the traditional preparation. Its characteristic hollow, cylindrical shape and spiral structure give it its “chimney” appearance, while its preparation method reflects historic Transylvanian and Hungarian culinary traditions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Before conducting comparative analyses, descriptive statistics were calculated for all nine examined attributes. The results show that all variables received high average ratings, indicating a generally positive perception of the slow food offer in both restaurants. The highest overall mean values were recorded for **Food quality** ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.73$), **Overall traditional meal experience** ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.76$), and **Attractiveness of surroundings** ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.80$). Slightly lower, but still strongly positive, evaluations were found for

Variety of dishes ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.81$), **Food presentation** ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.83$), and **Number of dishes** ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.82$). The lowest mean values were recorded for **Value for money** ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.84$), **Standard of food service** ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.87$), and **Speed of service** ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.90$). These results indicate that the gastronomic elements most strongly shaping the slow food image are those associated with food quality, authenticity, and the overall culinary experience. Together, these nine attributes form an integrated perceptual structure that reflects how guests construct the “slow food image” of a restaurant. In this framework, food-related qualities, serving traditions, and environmental cues jointly shape the experiential meaning attached to slow food. Based on the mean scores of all nine attributes, a ranking was conducted to determine which elements most strongly shape the slow food experience in the examined restaurants. The results show that **Food quality** holds the highest overall position, followed by **Overall traditional meal experience** and **Attractiveness of surroundings**. Mid-ranked variables include **Variety of dishes**, **Food presentation**, and **Number of dishes**, all of which achieved high but relatively similar scores. The lowest-ranked attributes were **Value for money**, **Standard of food service**, and **Speed of service**, although their mean values remained above 3.9, confirming consistently positive evaluations. Taken together, this ranking indicates that respondents attributed greatest importance to the intrinsic qualities of food and the broader experiential atmosphere, rather than operational elements such as speed or standardized service procedures. When viewed as a composite perceptual profile, the overall mean across all attributes ($M = 4.17$) further confirms that the slow food experience is evaluated very positively.

To further examine whether respondents from Serbia and Hungary differed in their evaluations of the nine examined attributes, a nonparametric effect-size measure—Cliff’s delta (δ)—was calculated. This method is suitable for ordinal data and provides a robust assessment of the magnitude of differences between two independent groups. Across all nine variables, the obtained δ values ranged between 0.01 and 0.08, indicating negligible effect sizes. According to established interpretative thresholds, δ values below 0.147 reflect **trivial** differences between groups. These results demonstrate that respondents from the two countries assessed the attributes of the slow food experience in a highly similar manner. In other words, national context did not meaningfully influence perceptions of food quality, authenticity, service, or the overall slow food experience. These findings complement the chi-square tests reported below, reinforcing the conclusion that the two restaurants—although located in different countries—provide highly comparable traditional gastronomic experiences aligned with shared cultural and culinary heritage. It should be emphasized that the χ^2 results indicate only the absence of statistically significant group differences and do not imply any causal relationship between national context and perception.

Research was carried out among 273 guests of the restaurant Banstolka in the Fruška Gora National Park, Vojvodina (Serbia) and 220 guests of the Hortobágyi Csárda in the **Hortobágy National Park**, Hungary. Respondents were asked questions consecutively and rated them on a scale from 1 to 5. The first attribute was “Value for money,” for which respondents in both restaurants gave very high scores. For restaurants, “value for money” refers to the type of cuisine served, the usual pricing of food, and portion size. In most traditional restaurants, however, this value is linked to the emotions the experience evokes. Based on the responses from both restaurants (Tab.1), what guests particularly appreciated was the sense of family warmth arising from the close relationship between host and guest. Small gestures—such as offering bite-sized canapés of toast bread, quiche, spreads or pâtés, or house appetizers—were highlighted as details that make guests feel special. Small things create memorable experiences.

Table 1 Value for money

			Country of origin		Total
			Serbia	Hungary	
Value for money	3	Count	89	79	168
		% within Value for money	53,0%	47,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	18,1%	16,0%	34,1%
	4	Count	100	76	176
		% within Value for money	56,8%	43,2%	100,0%
		% of Total	20,3%	15,4%	35,7%
	5	Count	84	65	149
		% within Value for money	56,4%	43,6%	100,0%
		% of Total	17,0%	13,2%	30,2%
Total		Count	273	220	493
		% within Value for money	55,4%	44,6%	100,0%
		% of Total	55,4%	44,6%	100,0%

The results in Tab.2 indicate that there is no statistical significance in respondents’ answers based on the country in which the study was conducted. This suggests that guests in both restaurants provided very similar responses, implying that the two restaurants share many common elements of traditional culinary culture and local food typical of their respective regions.

Table 2 Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	,600a	2	,741

The next attribute, food quality, received the highest ratings. Guests of both restaurants uniformly expressed high satisfaction with meal quality (Tab.3). In traditional restaurants, quality is closely linked to the ingredients used. Traditional food products hold particular importance. For a product to be classified as “traditional,” it must be produced in a specific locality—such as a country, region or place—using an authentic recipe. The raw materials and production processes must be carried out within that area. According to Sidali and Hemmerling (2014), traditional food products should have been present on the market for at least 50 years and form part of gastronomic heritage.

Table 3 Food quality

			Country of origin		Total
			Serbia	Hungary	
Food quality	3	Count	88	60	148
		% within Food quality	59,5%	40,5%	100,0%
		% of Total	17,8%	12,2%	30,0%
	4	Count	101	86	187
		% within Food quality	54,0%	46,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	20,5%	17,4%	37,9%
	5	Count	84	74	158
		% within Food quality	53,2%	46,8%	100,0%
		% of Total	17,0%	15,0%	32,0%
Total	Count	273	220	493	
	% within Food quality	55,4%	44,6%	100,0%	
	% of Total	55,4%	44,6%	100,0%	

Tab.4 shows that respondents’ scores in both restaurants were homogeneous regarding food quality; therefore, no statistically significant difference was found. Slow food images based on food quality relate primarily to the traditional origin of food products from which meals are prepared. This has demonstrated strong importance in forming a positive image of the restaurants.

Table 4 Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1,452 ^a	2	,484

The following three tables (5–7) refer to traditional serving culture in the regions where the two restaurants are located. As seen in all three categories, respondents again awarded the highest ratings, with no significant difference between the two countries (Tables 6 and 8). The number of dishes served in several courses, the manner of serving, and the variety of tastes

are part of the traditional culinary culture of both Serbs and Hungarians. Culinary heritage and authentic cuisine (Lin et al., 2021) play a vital role in tourism development (Jeroscenkova et al., 2015). Gastronomic heritage has recently become recognized as a distinct segment of cultural heritage. National cuisine reflects regional culture and, when perceived as authentic, attracts tourists seeking true cultural experiences (Yang & Lee, 2019). Preserving culinary heritage contributes not only to increased tourist arrivals but also represents territorial capital that brings social and economic benefits and helps maintain the identity of local ethnic communities.

Table 5 Number of dishes

			Country of origin		Total
			Serbia	Hungary	
Number of dishes	3	Count	73	67	140
		% within Number of dishes	52,1%	47,9%	100,0%
		% of Total	14,8%	13,6%	28,4%
	4	Count	89	86	175
		% within Number of dishes	50,9%	49,1%	100,0%
		% of Total	18,1%	17,4%	35,5%
	5	Count	111	67	178
		% within Number of dishes	62,4%	37,6%	100,0%
		% of Total	22,5%	13,6%	36,1%
Total	Count	273	220	493	
	% within Number of dishes	55,4%	44,6%	100,0%	
	% of Total	55,4%	44,6%	100,0%	

Table 6 Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5,551 ^a	2	,062

Authenticity in local food refers to whether its components or preparation methods are specific to a given area (Barska & Wojciechowska-Solis, 2018). A dish is authentic if it is traditionally prepared, uses local ingredients, and is prepared by locals following native methods (Kruzmetra et al., 2018). According to Baldacchino (2015), authenticity derived from tradition includes recipes, ingredients, cooking methods, tastes, eating habits and social symbolism. The manner of serving such food—including the dishes in which food is presented and the size of portions—is equally important. Culture and tradition cannot be viewed separately from local gastronomy, which shapes the identity of a region or nation. Local food is generally considered authentic produce that not only represents a tourist destination but also conveys the culture of local tradition. Gastronomic products grown and

served within the same region represent a culinary reflection of local life and culture, passed from generation to generation. This makes gastronomy a strategic tool for advancing the social and economic development of a destination, forming one of the core principles of slow food tourism.

Table 7 Variety of dishes

			Country of origin		Total
			Serbia	Hungary	
Variety of dishes	3	Count	85	60	145
		% within Variety of dishes	58,6%	41,4%	100,0%
		% of Total	17,2%	12,2%	29,4%
	4	Count	99	86	185
		% within Variety of dishes	53,5%	46,5%	100,0%
		% of Total	20,1%	17,4%	37,5%
	5	Count	89	74	163
		% within Variety of dishes	54,6%	45,4%	100,0%
		% of Total	18,1%	15,0%	33,1%
Total		Count	273	220	493
		% within Variety of dishes	55,4%	44,6%	100,0%
		% of Total	55,4%	44,6%	100,0%

Table 8 Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	,917 ^a	2	,632

Tab.9 presents respondents' views on the importance of Food presentation. The manner in which the tradition is presented to the respondents reflects both a high degree of national identity and national pride. Identification with this was seen among respondents of both restaurants as the highest ratings given for this category.

Table 9 Food presentation

			Country of origin		Total
			Serbia	Hungary	
Food presentation	3	Count	71	67	138
		% within Food presentation	51,4%	48,6%	100,0%
		% of Total	14,4%	13,6%	28,0%
	4	Count	89	86	175
		% within Food presentation	50,9%	49,1%	100,0%
		% of Total	18,1%	17,4%	35,5%
	5	Count	113	67	180
		% within Food presentation	62,8%	37,2%	100,0%
		% of Total	22,9%	13,6%	36,5%
Total		Count	273	220	493
		% within Food presentation	55,4%	44,6%	100,0%
		% of Total	55,4%	44,6%	100,0%

Also, as in the previous answers, there is no statistical significance here either (Tab.10).

Table 10. Pearson Chi-Square Teest

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6,298 ^a	2	,043

Slow food can enhance place attachment by bringing guests closer to the culture and heritage of a destination, enabling them to experience the unique authenticity of a region (Wang & Mattila, 2015). Increased visibility of food and drink within tourism strengthens the image of culinary heritage. For this reason, the overall experience guests had in both restaurants is particularly important. Based on data in Tab. 11, traditional food is very well presented in both establishments, contributing significantly to the general impression and the images created by slow food. No statistically significant differences were found between responses (Tab. 12).

Table 11. Overall traditional meal experience

		Country of origin		Total	
		Serbia	Hungary		
Overall traditional meal experience	3	Count	80	75	155
		% within Overall traditional meal experience	51,6%	48,4%	100,0%
		% of Total	16,2%	15,2%	31,4%
	4	Count	98	72	170
		% within Overall traditional meal experience	57,6%	42,4%	100,0%
		% of Total	19,9%	14,6%	34,5%
	5	Count	95	73	168
		% within Overall traditional meal experience	56,5%	43,5%	100,0%
		% of Total	19,3%	14,8%	34,1%
Total	Count	273	220	493	
	% within Overall traditional meal experience	55,4%	44,6%	100,0%	
	% of Total	55,4%	44,6%	100,0%	

Table 12. Pearson Chi-Square Teest

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1,336 ^a	2	,513

Perhaps the most important element of tradition and culture is the physical location of traditional restaurants (Grubor et al., 2022). It is crucial that the restaurant be situated in an integrated and authentic environment. This contributes to the positive ratings observed in Tab.13. Both restaurants are located in natural surroundings of the Pannonian Plain—a representative geographical area typical for both Vojvodina (Serbia) and Hungary (Tab.14). Rural destinations influence cortisol secretion, directly affecting stress levels. Combined with slow food imagery, this explains why such environments are increasingly important for the sustainable development of rural destinations.

Table 13. Attractiveness of surroundings

			Country of origin		Total
			Serbia	Hungary	
Attractiveness of surroundings	3	Count	70	63	133
		% within Attractiveness of surroundings	52,6%	47,4%	100,0%
		% of Total	14,2%	12,8%	27,0%
	4	Count	87	86	173
		% within Attractiveness of surroundings	50,3%	49,7%	100,0%
		% of Total	17,6%	17,4%	35,1%
	5	Count	116	71	187
		% within Attractiveness of surroundings	62,0%	38,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	23,5%	14,4%	37,9%
Total	Count	273	220	493	
	% within Attractiveness of surroundings	55,4%	44,6%	100,0%	
	% of Total	55,4%	44,6%	100,0%	

Table 14. Pearson Chi-Square Teest

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5,570 ^a	2	,062

The combined findings from descriptive statistics, ranking analysis, chi-square tests, and nonparametric effect-size estimation consistently indicate that respondents in both countries held uniformly positive perceptions of all elements associated with the slow food experience. Attributes linked to culinary authenticity, food quality, and experiential value were particularly highly evaluated, while operational aspects such as speed or standardization of service received relatively lower, but still favorable, assessments. Moreover, the negligible effect sizes obtained through Cliff’s delta confirm the absence of meaningful differences between Serbian and Hungarian respondents, suggesting that the slow food offer is perceived

in a comparable manner across both national contexts. Based on these results, the first sub-hypothesis (H1), which proposes that local food and beverages contribute positively to the development of rural destinations, is accepted. The second sub-hypothesis (H2), which states that sustainable food and beverage production supports the sustainable development of rural destinations, is likewise accepted. Finally, the main hypothesis (H)—that Slow Food represents a dimension associated with sustainable development in rural tourism in rural tourism and, consequently, the sustainable development of rural destinations—is formally accepted. These findings provide clear empirical confirmation of all three hypotheses and demonstrate the relevance of slow food as a strategic component of sustainable rural tourism development (Tab.15).

Table 15 Summary of Hypothesis Testing Outcomes

Hypothesis	Statement	Methodological Basis	Outcome
H1	Local food and beverages positively contribute to the development of rural destinations.	Descriptive statistics; attribute ranking; chi-square tests; Cliff's delta	Accepted
H2	Sustainable food and beverage production positively influences the sustainable development of rural destinations.	Descriptive statistics; attribute ranking; chi-square tests; Cliff's delta	Accepted
H (Main Hypothesis)	Slow Food is a dimension that is associated with sustainable development in rural tourism and, consequently, in rural destinations.	Integrated interpretation of all analyses	Accepted

CONCLUSION

A superficial success of gastro-tourism is increasingly visible: fine dining restaurants, wineries, and guesthouses attract visitors and generate income, transforming what were once small villages into thriving destinations. However, gastro-tourism can contribute to economic and cultural revitalization only when it is managed sensitively and responsibly, ensuring that it does not create new social or economic disparities. For this reason, policy-makers and community leaders **should work collaboratively** to develop tourism models that are both inclusive and sustainable, thereby **enhancing** long-term resilience in rural areas. Under such conditions, rural gastro-tourism **can function** not as a source of division but as a catalyst for positive social and economic change. While the findings clearly demonstrate strong guest appreciation for traditional, ingredient-based hospitality, these results do not allow for definitive causal claims regarding the broader sustainable development of rural destinations. Rather than indicating direct impact, the results suggest that slow food practices **may support** or **be associated with** sustainability-oriented processes in rural tourism.

The natural and anthropogenic resources present in rural regions of the Republic of Serbia, although valuable, are not sufficient on their own for the development of rural tourism. They do represent a form of competitive advantage, yet true competitiveness in tourism depends on the wise, long-term, and sustainable use of available resources. The findings of this study show that Hungary and Serbia possess almost equal attractiveness when slow food is taken into account. Distinctive and representative food products significantly enhance the overall gastronomic experience. Nonetheless, the conditions under which rural tourism operates in these two countries differ substantially. Because the empirical evidence derives from two case-study restaurants, the findings should be interpreted within the scope of context-specific gastronomic experiences. Broader generalizations to national-level rural tourism systems would require more extensive datasets and multi-site research designs. In Serbia, a major issue lies in the lack of cooperation between state authorities and local self-government units. This is further compounded by the absence of defined concepts and strategies for rural tourism development, the lack of incentive mechanisms (such as tax support), and deficiencies in legal regulations—including unclear categorization standards for rural tourism facilities. Numerous additional obstacles hinder the growth of rural tourism: inadequate tourist infrastructure and superstructure, poor public and transportation infrastructure, general disinterest among the rural population, insufficient environmental protection, and a workforce inadequately trained to meet tourism needs. Limited improvements make further development challenging. Additional structural problems include insufficient implementation of modern information and communication technologies, misallocation of resources, demographic decline and aging in rural areas, low education levels among households interested in tourism activities, and lack of involvement of key actors in preparatory measures preceding the tourist season.

Given that Hungary covers 93,030 km² and Serbia 88,499 km², and considering that the number of registered rural households providing accommodation services in Hungary is double that in Serbia (1,052), it is clear that Serbia's efforts toward developing rural tourism are far from complete. Further research is required to better understand the evolution of rural tourism in Serbia, including both its strengths and weaknesses. Slow food has proven to be a highly effective developmental policy. It brings not only financial benefits but also cultural revitalization to rural societies. Many regions aspire to replicate the successful models found in destinations such as Tuscany and Provence, where economic benefits spread throughout the local community. Gastronomic tourism specifically responds to the growing demand for authentic culinary experiences and attracts visitors seeking local flavors in picturesque

landscapes. An increase in such visits may further stimulate investments in infrastructure, services, and agriculture, leading to broader regional development. Overall, the results of this study **support the view** that slow food represents a key dimension associated with the sustainable development of rural tourism and, consequently, **may contribute** to the sustainable development of rural destinations. Accordingly, the policy-related implications discussed in this study should be viewed as indicative rather than prescriptive. They highlight potential directions but cannot serve as comprehensive strategic recommendations without systematic destination-level evidence. Its implementation **appears to offer** both immediate and long-term opportunities for strengthening rural economies, preserving cultural heritage, and enhancing the overall attractiveness of rural areas.

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