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MODELS OF STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION IN FOOD TOURISM EXPERIENCES

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TOMO JESENIČNIK

Food is an essential part of every tourism experience.

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Models of stakeholder collaboration in food tourism experiences

ABSTRACT: This study explores the role of stakeholders in creating and managing food tourism experiences. The main aim was to discover who participates in this process, why, and how. The research is based on interviews and participatory observation of twenty-two case studies mainly located in rural areas in eight Mediterranean countries. The paper focuses on two types of food experience: food events and food services with additional subtypes. The results reveal three models of stakeholder collaboration: one typical for events, one typical for services, and one emphasizing more direct interaction between visitors and local communities. The findings show diversity in the connections among stakeholders, who have different motives and roles in food experiences.

KEY WORDS: food tourism, gastronomy tourism, tourism experience, stakeholders, network, collaboration, Mediterranean

Modeli sodelovanj deležnikov v kulinarični turistični izkušnji

POVZETEK: Študija raziskuje vlogo deležnikov pri ustvarjanju in upravljanju kulinaričnih turističnih izkušenj. Glavni cilj je bil odkriti kdo, zakaj in kako sodeluje v tem procesu. Raziskave temeljijo na intervjujih in opazovanju z udeležbo v 22 študijskih primerih v pretežno podeželskih območjih v osmih sredozemskih državah. Osredotočili smo se na dve vrsti izkušenj: kulinarične prireditve in kulinarične storitve z njihovimi dodatnimi podtipi. Naši rezultati kažejo na tri modele sodelovanja deležnikov: enega, značilnega za dogodke, drugega za storitve in tretjega, ki poudarja bolj neposreden stik med obiskovalci ter lokalno skupnostjo. Ugotovitve kažejo raznolikost povezav med deležniki, ki imajo različne motive in nastopajo v različnih vlogah.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: kulinarični turizem, gastronomski turizem, turistična izkušnja, deležniki, mreža, sodelovanje, Sredozemlje

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1 Introduction

Culinary tourism, *food tourism*, and *gastronomy tourism* are interchangeable terms associating food and tourism. The term *culinary tourism* is favored in North America, *food tourism* in Australia and Asia, and *gastronomy tourism* in Europe, although it seems that international organizations such as the World Food Travel Organization or the World Tourism Organization (hereafter: UNWTO) seem to prefer *food tourism* because the terms *culinary tourism* or *gastronomy tourism* have an »elitist ring« (Rachão et al. 2019, 35). This paper also uses the term *food tourism*.

Although food is an essential part of every tourism experience, studies and typologies are difficult to come by. In a special report (OCTA & Skift 2015, 4) food tourism is characterized as »any tourism experience in which one learns about, appreciates, and/or consumes food and drink that reflects the local, regional or national cuisine, heritage and culture.« The UNWTO has adopted the definition by Hall and Mitchell (2001), which identified the following activities of food tourism attracting visitors: primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for food tastings, and experiencing specialist food production. This definition implies that food tourism involves many different stakeholders with different motives and roles in entrepreneurial food networks (Boesen, Sundbo and Sundbo 2016).

This paper explores the role of stakeholders in creating and managing food tourism experiences: who participates in this process, why, and how. It investigates food tourism experiences in the Mediterranean area and addresses the following research questions:
- Do different types of food experiences stimulate the creation of various stakeholder networks? Who are the stakeholders collaborating within food experiences, and what is their role in a specific type?
- Which motives drive stakeholders to connect and set up a new food experience? What are the strengths and potential threats in their collaboration?

The objective of this paper is thus to identify stakeholders involved in different types of food experience, identify their motives for cooperation, and explore their role in the network.

2 Background

Rural areas are well-positioned for cultural and food tourism. In addition to distinct cultural and social capital, they combine natural environments suited for tourism opportunities (Bole, Šmid Hribar and Pipan 2017). Food tourism in rural areas is increasingly being marketed with the goal of »reconnecting« with nature, resilience to globalization, a search for authenticity, freshness, and support for local producers and local products (Sidali, Kastenholz and Bianchi 2015; Ledinek Lozej 2020, 2021). In a way, food has become an ideal endogenous resource of rural territorial development, in which the knowledge of local gastronomy is either rediscovered or newly invented for economic gain or social wellbeing (Ray 1998).

Food has become an attraction in its own right and a motivation for travel. Food tourism also depends on consumers' socioeconomic characteristics, especially their educational profile and age group (Vuksanović et al. 2019). Hall and Sharples (2003) state that a visit to a restaurant is not food tourism in itself, but the desire to experience a particular type of food or the produce of a specific region, or to taste dishes prepared by a particular chef, could be motives for such travel. There is no definite typology of food tourism experiences; however, Smith and Xiao (2008) present a typology of food tourism resources, which could serve in understanding the variety of tourism experiences based on them (Table 1). They are divided into four groups: facilities, events, activities, and organizations. Certain resources fit better into a more experience-based economic model.

In general, one can distinguish between three types, or »generations,« of research on food tourism experiences (Richards 2015). The first generation is where the main topic was how to engage consumers by designing experience elements to make tourism products that engage all five senses. The second generation of research is marked by the emergence of the »foodie« – a conscious and experienced consumer, driven by a search for »authentic« and »exotic« culinary experiences. In the third generation of research, the tourist is seen as a co-creator of culinary experience with direct interaction between the consumer and the residents (cooking classes at home, tours at food markets with local producers, etc.). This also requires great interconnectedness of local producers; in this vein, Richards (2015) advocates a more experience- and network-based approach instead of the atomized view of tourism gastronomy.

Another attempt to classify food tourism was provided by Bessière (2013), who linked gastronomy to heritage. According to her, gastronomy heritage is understood as collective memory and a cultural code connected with particular production and food modes, rooted in a territory, space, and time. Bessière distinguished three basic forms of gastronomy heritage. The first is the traditional or artisanal form, in which stakeholders aim to conserve or preserve traditional heritage and have a strong territorial attachment. Second is the industrial form of gastronomy heritage promotion, in which heritage is promoted by one iconic or dominant production, such as a type of cheese or other products. The third form is heritage promoted around rural enterprises, in which new innovative tourist activities are centered on local producers and their farming activities.

How different stakeholders are engaged in the creation of food experience can be understood through the supply chain theory, which »refers to the body of concepts, models, and relationships describing the linkages of producers and distributors in the context of the creation of a commodity« (Smith and Xiao 2008, 291). According to Atkin and Affonso (2004), each stakeholder enters the initiative with its level of contribution (high or low), level of risk (high or low), and level of expectations regarding the profit (high or low, and short- or long-term). Different expectations lead to more difficult management of the food experience and require a more skilled leader to manage potential conflict situations. Boesen, Sundbo, and Sundbo (2016) argue that the success of the collaborations within a network depends strongly on the action and attitude logics of actors, depending on their motivation to join the initiative.

Actors' actions are determined by either one logic or several logics in which one is dominant (Thornton and Ocasio 2008; Cloutier and Langley 2013). According to Boesen, Sundbo and Sundbo (2016; Table 2), it is not unusual for actors to follow different logics in different situations (networks or cooperation initiatives) or to change their perspective at different stages of cooperation, especially in challenging situations such as resolving disagreements. If network members are able to adjust and shift between different logics, the initiative is easier to manage (Boesen, Sundbo and Sundbo 2016). If the pluralism of logic is too obvious and there is a lack of dynamism in actors' behavior (willingness to compromise), initiatives need to undergo significant organizational changes or they fall apart. The success of the food experience thus depends significantly on the compatibility of the actor's motives because this determines their ability to positively collaborate within the network (Mei, Lerfald and Brata 2017).

Finally, it must be stressed that the stakeholders' motives for collaboration in creating food experiences are not only economic in nature. In cases of other tourism activities, the main motivation for stakeholders'

Table 1: Food tourism resources and products (adapted from Smith and Xiao 2008).

Facilities	Activities	Events	Organizations
• Buildings/structures: food-processing facilities, wineries, breweries, farmers' markets, stores, museums, restaurants • Land uses: farms, orchards, vineyards, food streets • Routes: wine routes, food routes, gourmet trails	• Consumption: dining, picnics, food purchase, pick-your-own operations • Touring: wine, agricultural regions, city food districts • Education/observation: cooking classes, wine tastings, chef competitions, reading food magazines and books	• Consumer shows: food and wine shows, kitchen shows, product launches • Festivals: food or wine festivals, harvest festivals	• Restaurant classifications or certifications (Michelin, etc.), food/wine classifications and associations (slow food, etc.)

Table 2: Overview of action and attitude logics and their components (Boltanski and Thevenot 1999; Boesen, Sundbo and Sundbo 2016).

Logic	Higher common principle and motives	Worth attributes
Inspired	Creativity, ingenuity, nonconformity	Passionate, spontaneous
Domestic	Reputation, authority, hierarchy	Discreet, trustworthy, honest
Civic	Collective interest, solidarity, equality	Unitary, official
Opinion	Recognition, renown	Reputed, visible
Market	Price, purchasing power	Desirable, value
Industrial	Productivity, efficiency, expertise	Functional, reliable

collaboration is in local community-building, personal empowerment, and assuming responsibility for their own (local) development (Bole, Pipan and Komac 2013). In those cases, stakeholders go beyond only economic competitiveness and collaborate to pursue common principles and motives as well (Šmid Hribar and Ledinek Lozej 2013).

3 Methods

This study analyzed twenty-two food experiences (Figure 1), mainly located in rural areas in eight Mediterranean countries. Sixteen cases were set up before the MEDFEST project (MEDFEST – MED culinary heritage experiences: How to create sustainable tourist destinations) in 2017, and six of them were newly created as a result of the same project during 2018 and 2019.

3.1 Existing food tourism experiences

In selecting the sixteen food experiences for this study, the availability of data and accessibility of stakeholders for interviews were considered. The goal was to identify diverse types of food experiences (see 3.3; Capatti 2012; Richards 2012; Kumer et al. 2019) in eight Mediterranean countries (Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain). For each selected experience, four to eight in-depth interviews were conducted with organizers and other involved stakeholders (farmers, local tourism authorities, representatives of associations, and others). The questionnaire was structured in such a way as to collect data about the content of the culinary experience, territorial anchoring of the experience, organization of the stakeholders, and inclusion of experience in existing policies and strategies. Interviews were carried out between June and August 2017, and they were written into stories by the project partners (Kumer, Šmid Hribar and Razpotnik Visković 2018).

3.2 New food tourism experiences

Six food experiences in this study are new ones. They were created in 2018 and 2019 as part of the MEDFEST project. The process has been followed from the beginning, gathering information about the content of the experience and tracking the involvement of the stakeholders.

3.3 Typology of food tourism experiences

For the content analysis of food experiences, which tried to establish distinct types of food experiences, the following typology was used:
- Events related to food:
  - Single-activity events (usually focused on one specific theme and one place);
  - Combined-activity events (a broader theme, various locations and multiple places in a wider region, throughout the year or season).
- Services related to food:
  - Place-based services (linked to one location; e.g., a kitchen for workshops);
  - Tours (linked to several locations organized in an integrated activity).

3.4 Content analysis and models

Content analysis of food experiences was performed based on interviews, study visits, and detailed project reports. The following information indicating the main characteristics of the food experiences was obtained: inclusion of the stakeholders and the main holder(s), their motives and roles in the network, approaches taken, and type of financial support. The term holder refers to the institution, association, entrepreneur, network, or other entity that organizes a food tourism experience, and can be public, private or mixed when there are more than one holder involved. Based on collected data for previous and new food
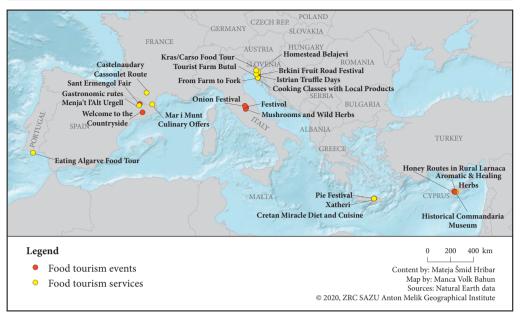
Figure 1: Locations of food tourism experiences in eight Mediterranean countries explored in this paper.

experiences, an overview table of twenty-two food experiences was created (Table 3) as well as a matrix of stakeholders' roles and networks (Figure 2).

In addition, the models of stakeholder networks were created with a classification of experiences based on who the holder of the experience is and who participates (which group of stakeholders), what the main actions are in creating the experience, and what their role is in the experience.

4 Results

4.1 Types of food tourism experiences and stakeholders involved

The food tourism experiences analyzed (hereafter: experiences) can mainly be divided into two main and distinguishing types, which can be further subdivided into two subtypes. Of the twenty-two experiences, almost half (10; 45%) are food events, which were divided into events with single activities (6; 27%) and events with combined activities (4; 18%). The remaining experiences (12; 55%) were classified as food-related services; seven of them (32%) fit into place-based services, and five (23%) exist as tours. Sixteen experiences were created earlier, and six were set up during the project, which made it possible to gain insight into their creation. All the latter experiences received start-up investments. In the older experiences, the food events observed depend on longer financial support and are all financed by public authorities (see Table 3 and Figure 2). On the other hand, all but one of the food services (the *Castelnaudary Cassoulet Route*) received start-up investment, but they can continue with their financial resources. Half of the creators of food services invested their own resources.

Interestingly, the majority of events (8; 80%) are managed by more than one holder usually two to three public or public and private institutions are involved in a top-down approach. Exceptions are the event *Sant Ermengol Fair*, where the initiative came from a citizen, but was later led by the municipality and therefore classified as a »mixed approach,« and the *Onion Festival*, which was initiated and led by a local association. In contrast, most of the services (9; 75%) are managed by a single, often private holder using a bottom-up approach.

Table 3: Food experiences by country, year of establishment, type and number of holders, type of financial support, and approach.

Type, number	Name	Country	Established	Type and number of holder	Financial support	Approach
Events (10)						
Single activity (6)	Aromatic & Healing Herbs	Cyprus	2008	Mixed (3)	Longer/ongoing	Top-down
	Festivol	Italy	2006	Mixed (2)	Longer/ongoing	Top-down
	Sant Ermengol Fair	Spain	1995	Public (1)	Longer/ongoing	Mixed
	Mushrooms and Wild Herbs*	Italy	1994†	Mixed (2)	Longer/ongoing	Top-down
	Onion Festival	Italy	1981	Mixed (3)	Longer/ongoing	Bottom-up
	Pie Festival	Greece	2012	Private (1)	Longer/ongoing	Top-down
Combined activities (4)	Welcome to the Countryside	Spain	2016	Public (2)	Longer/ongoing	Top-down
	Brkini Fruit Road Festival	Slovenia	2015	Mixed (6)	Longer/ongoing	Top-down
	Honey Routes in Rural Larnaca*	Cyprus	2014	Mixed (2)	Startup investments	Top-down
	Istrian Truffle Days	Croatia	1994	Public (3)	Longer/ongoing	Top-down
Services (12)						
Place-based (7)	Cooking Classes with Local Products	Croatia	2015	Public (1)	Startup investments	Top-down
	Cretan Miracle Diet and Cuisine	Greece	2013	Private (1)	No public support	Bottom-up
	From Farm to Fork*	Croatia	2019	Public (1)	Startup investments	Top-down
	Historical Commandaria Museum	Cyprus	2010	Mixed (2)	Startup investments	Bottom-up
	Homestead Belajevi	Slovenia	2013	Private (1)	Startup investments	Bottom-up
	Tourist Farm Butul	Slovenia	1997	Private (1)	Startup investments	Bottom-up
	Xatheri	Greece	2014	Private (1)	Startup investments	Bottom-up
Tour (5)	Castelnaudary Cassoulet Route	France	2007	Public (2)	Longer/ongoing	Top-down
	Eating Algarve Food Tour	Portugal	2016	Private (1)	Startup investments	Bottom-up
	Kras/Carso Food Tour*	Slovenia	2019	Private (1)	Startup investments	Bottom-up
	Mar i Munt Culinary offers*	France	2019	Public (2)	Startup investments	Top-down
	Gastronomy Routes Menjà't l'Alt Urgell*	Spain	2019	Private (1)	Startup investments	Bottom-up

* Experiences developed within the MEDFEST project
† first developed in 1994, improved in 2018

The main stakeholders involved in Mediterranean food experiences are public institutions, food producers, and private holders of food experiences. In-depth interviews showed that tourism and rural development agencies as part of public authorities are the driving force in the creation of food events, and that entrepreneurs, who are not necessarily farmers, play a significant role in the creation of food services. However, many other stakeholders are involved in the creation and organization of food experiences. They have different motives and roles: they organize, manage, finance, promote, or only participate with their services or products. The following stakeholders were identified (Figure 2):

- **Public bodies** are usually concerned with government, tourism, or development and are active at the local, regional, or national level (e.g., the local council, municipality, tourism organization, or regional development agency); their role is particularly crucial at food events, where they provide funding and publicity and are often the first initiator of the event.
- **Local agricultural producers** either act individually or are organized in associations and cooperatives (e.g., farmers, bean producers, cheese makers, winemakers, beekeepers, fishermen, herb farmers, duck farmers, etc.). They supply the main ingredients and food-related products, and sometimes they initiate and finance food events.
- **Private food tourism experience creators** are entrepreneurs (sometimes a family) or associations, sometimes with a professional background in gastronomy or cultural heritage, but this is not necessary. They are central to the food services they create but are also often involved in food events.
- **Supporting experts and professionals** (e.g., chefs, nutrition experts, brand makers, travel guides, or text writers) are essential because they often add a special value to individual experiences to make them more attractive.
- **Local private companies, small shops, restaurants, and hotels** (e.g., dairies, truffle businesses, canneries, etc.) offer products and additional services; in rare cases they also finance food experiences.
- **Tour operators and travel agencies** are particularly involved in providing services in less accessible areas.
- **The research sector and schools** are crucial for the transfer of knowledge, learning, and development.
- **Various chambers** (e.g., chambers of commerce, trades, crafts, and agriculture) are also involved.
- **Other stakeholders** involved include artists, active citizens, the press, protected areas, and museums.

Three models of stakeholder networking were identified and defined (Figure 3). In Model 1, one or more public institutions that are already linked to each other and already acting as a driving force for development choose a topic that is significant for the area, and they achieve a common vision for organization a food event. In later stages, they invite other stakeholders to participate, thereby expanding the network.

In contrast, the model for services (Model 2) involves an entrepreneur creating an experience and making unique agreements with stakeholders that offer products or services. Key services could be based on the entrepreneurs' knowledge, products, or location, or they might outsource to external stakeholders.

The analysis revealed another approach to creating food services, which is represented in Model 3. In this case, it is an existing group of private food experience creators and/or local food producers and accommodation providers that start creating new food services based on their previous collaboration and mutual trust. Based on the search for synergies among themselves, they create a range of food services arranged in different tourism activities. They might invite other national and international stakeholders to collaborate, but they tend to be less open than the private entrepreneurs in Model 2.

Because the private creators of the food experience in Models 2 and 3 invest their own resources, it is of great importance whether they can obtain additional funds for advertising and joint marketing, often provided by public authorities.

4.2 Motivation behind different types of food experiences

The motives for launching the food experience were explained by the holders during interviews; they explained how the food experience began and how a stakeholder network was built around it. The motives were thus identified at the level of the food experience and not for each participating stakeholder, where differences might occur.

The motives of different stakeholders may vary depending on the nature of the food experience and the related network, which means that the same stakeholders play different roles and have different

motives in different food experiences (Figure 4). The most common identified motive for initiating food experiences by public authorities or tourism organizations is to increase the visibility of the tourist destinations, to safeguard heritage, to create networks with links between service providers and local producers, and to prolong tourist activities into the off-season period. Networking enables them to offer a common narrative and contribute to the diversification of tourist products and development of regional tourist services. The main motivation for an association of local producers or cooperatives to hold a food event is to participate in the effective promotion and wide recognition of a specific local product, diet, or culture. In the case of private entrepreneurs, direct economic benefit is the main motive, but not the only one. Through stories created around food experiences, many private holders educate visitors about the importance and valorization of food resources as stated by Topole et al. (2021). Promotion and wider recognition are also crucial aspects for them, and so it is important to include them in preexisting websites, leaflets, and joint market presentations supported by tourism organizations and public authorities.

Legend: Initiator; Organizer; Participator; F financial support

Types of food experience	Name of food experience	regional/national authority	munipal/local authority	local tourism organisation	regional tourism organisation	national tourism organisation	regional development agency	local development agency	association of local	cultural and other association	local producers	local women/women association	artist/musicians	experts/professionals	tour operators/travel agents	private culinary experience creator	regional institue for agriculture and forestry	school/university/R&D	private company/service providers	local restaurants/caterers	local hotels/tourist farms/business	active citizens	Chambers	existing partnership/network	press/TV channel	protected area/museums
EVENTS																										
single activity	Aromatic & Healing Herbs	+	F+		+	F +					+	+		+	+							+		+		
	Festivol		F+				F		+	+				+								+		+		
	Fira de Sant Ermengol	F+	+							+		+		+					+	F+	+	+				
	*Mushrooms and wild herbs		F+					+	+		+					+				+	+					
	Onion Festival	+	F+					+	+		+		+									+	+	F+		
	Pie Festival		F+						+		+															
combined activities	Benvinguts a Pagès	F+			+				+		+								+		+	+				
	Brkini Fruit Road Festival		F+	+				+	+		+						+			+	+	+		+		
	*Honey routes in rural Larnaca		+		+				+		+	+		+	+				+	+	+	+		F+	+	
	Istrian truffle days	F+	+	F+	F				+		+		+							+	+					
SERVICES																										
place-based	Cooking classes with local products		F+					F+			+			+										F+		
	Cretan Miracle Diet and Cuisine		+								+				+	F +		+			+					
	*From farm to fork	+		+	+			F+		+	+			+	+				+	+	+			+		
	Historical Commandaria Museum		F+		+			+		+	+	+		+												
	Homestead Belajevi		+						+		+							F +	+		+					
	Tourist Farm Butul		+	+							+							F +		+		+				+
	Xatheri								+		+					+	+	F +		+	+					
route	Castelnaudary Cassoulet Route		+	+	F+					+		+		+							+					
	Eating Algarve Food tour		+	+					+		+			+	+					F+	+	+	+		+	+
	*Kras Carso Food Tour		+	+						F+	+			+					F+							
	*Mar i munt culinary offers	+	+	+					+		+				+				F +	+	+					
	*Rutes gastronòm. menja't l'alt Urgell	+	F+				+	+	+	+		+		+	+				F +	+	+					

Figure 2: Stakeholders involved in creating, financing, and organizing selected food tourism experiences.

Model 1

Organizers + financiers

Mini network of public authorities, tourism/development organization, association of producers

Create a common vision of food event

Invite others and organize event

Active citizens

Companies/ tour operators/ restaurants/hotels

Volunteering, providing services and products

Additional associations

Experts

Private food experience holders

Local producers

Press/media

Model 2

Organizers + financiers

Private food experience creator/ development agency

Prepare a programe/service/products based on their own resources

Several internal meetings

Municipality

Companies/tour operators/ restaurants/hotels

Associations

Supporting professionals (designer, guide, photographer…)

Tourism organisation

Development agency

Local producers

Research institutions, schools

Promotion + financial support

Create a food service

Get connected in new networks

Model 3

Organizers + financiers

Mini network of private food experience creators and/or local food producers/ accomodation providers

Prepare a programe/service/products based on their own resources

Several internal meetings fo find synergies

Municipality

Companies/tour operators/ restaurants/hotels

Associations

Supporting professionals (designer, guide, photographer…)

Tourism organisation

Development agency

Local producers

Research institutions, schools

Promotion + financial support

Create packages of food service

Legend:

Holder of the experinece

Activity

Role

5 Discussion

The investigation of the selected cases of food tourism experiences revealed that they were created for different purposes, by different initiators, and for different target groups. The study identified two significantly different types with four subtypes. This typology can be closely related to the three generations of food tourism experiences presented by Richards (2015), in which the first generation can be associated with events (e.g., *Festivol*), the second generation with more personalized food experiences, such as services located in existing restaurants, development centers, and similar venues (e.g., *Cooking Classes with Local Products*), and the third generation with services that take place at home (e.g., *Tourist Farm Butul, Belajevi Homestead,* and *Xatheri*) and food tours for which direct interaction between the consumer and local producers prevails (e.g., *Gastronomy Routes Menja't l'Alt Urgell, Kras/Carso Food Tour*). Food tours are a mixture of more traditional tourist services, increasingly co-created by consumers, and are therefore a hybrid or mixture of the first and second generation, combining elements of the third generation of food experiences.

The two main types of food experiences differ in terms of their motives, type of holders, and approaches, as presented in Chapter 4. It seems that food events are used when mostly public institutions, sometimes together with local associations, try to raise the visibility of local products (e.g., agricultural products) that are inherently linked to traditional agri-food productions and local identity. It is widely assumed that such recognition and valorization of local products will lead to favorable economic consequences in the long run – first, by increasing the added value of the products themselves and the overall tourist draw resulting from these products, and, second, by increasing sales of these products, not only during the event at the venue, but also later (e.g., during a revisit to the location) or elsewhere (e.g., in supermarkets where this particular product can be purchased). In the case of services, on the other hand, organizers expect short-term and immediate economic benefits from dealing with visitors. Richards (2015) already noted that creating and managing food experiences requires a complex network of different stakeholders. This analysis supports this argument because all experiences involve a large number of differently organized stakeholders (different roles), simplified here into three main models of stakeholder networks (Figure 3). According

LOGIC	Inspired	Domestic	Civic	Opinion	Market	Industrial
MAIN MOTIVES	Knowledge transfer, educating	Community building				
		Creating links between service providers & visitors				
		Support for local producers				
			Safeguarding heritage			
			Raising awareness about cultural offer			
					Recognition, promotion, valorization	
						Networking, creating partnership among actors
						Additional channel for selling products
						Selling service

Figure 4: Motives for initiating the food experience.

to the analysis, stakeholders connect with each other in different ways. This interaction depends on the type of food experience and the initial investment required (time, resources, etc.). From an organizational point of view, it is usually more demanding to organize a food event than food service, but an event only takes place once a year, whereas a service should be carried out or offered as often as possible.

As shown in Figure 3 (Model 1), public institutions are more involved in the design of food events. The creation process is based on smaller, already existing institutional networks in which the holders have a common vision about the food experience and also share similar expectations. From this top-down position, they later invite other stakeholders to participate. On the other hand, food services are mainly organized by entrepreneurs. In this case (Model 2) as well, at least initially, communication flows in one direction, from the entrepreneur to other invited stakeholders. Over time, the entrepreneurs create their networks, work within these networks on various interrelated topics, and even exchange guests (e.g., *Tourist Farm Butul* and *Belajevi Homestead*; for more details, see Topole and Pipan 2020).

The most complex and multilateral network (Model 3) is created when the holder is a network or group of highly motivated entrepreneurs, members of a local association, or cooperatives, who are networked among themselves, seeking synergies and able to offer unique food experience(s) due to their diversity. Such a network has been observed in the case of the *Kras/Carso Food Tour*, in which two stakeholders offer traditional food and two modern cuisines, another two stakeholders are wine producers, and one of them is very good at giving cooking classes. Such an approach can strengthen resilience among food experience holders, which is particularly important in a time of a crisis (such as the Covid-19 crisis). Even if they may not receive guests for a certain period of time, they can focus on the production of homemade products, agriculture and wine, virtual cooking classes, and so on. With this type of networking, selected stakeholders in the area no longer compete with each other but start to work together by creating fair opportunities for everyone in the network. The obstacle to such an approach, however, is that those involved are less open to external stakeholders when they need someone to coordinate and sell the food service they offer. In some of the cases observed in Slovenia, it seems extremely difficult or even impossible to join a network if you are not invited.

The adaptability and resilience of the stakeholders engaged in food tourism are also reflected in their different and changing motives for participating in the networks. Taking a closer look at the producers gathered around the *Kras/Carso Food Tour*, their involvement can be observed in various food events in the region, where they share responsibility and commitment with many other regional tourism stakeholders. In this role, they raise the visibility of their destination, local characteristics, local products, and also their own products. However, involvement in the tour means more individual involvement and investment (in facilities, advertising, building sales channels, etc.), obliging those involved to bear direct costs of either success or failure.

Further synthesizing types of collaboration in stakeholder networks, two types can be distinguished. The first one is more hierarchical and formal in the sense that a stakeholder is seen as a »leader« that makes connections and invites other participants based on his or her motives in creating food experiences. Usually, the top-down approach is used, and often a leading stakeholder is a public institution (e.g., *Honey Routes in Rural Larnaca* or *From Farm to Fork*). The second type of collaboration is more informal; there is no clear leader, and decision-making within a group is consensual. This is more common when the creators of the experience are members of associations or cooperatives such as the *Kras/Carso Food Tour*. Another important aspect of collaboration is when the existing networks are open to new stakeholders to join the existing initiatives. Again, some are more closed and operate within a well-established group of stakeholders with roles already assigned, and other experiences are open to stakeholders in the sense that they can freely join the network if they contribute to the experience (see Table 4). It remains to be explored which types

Table 4: Some examples of the type of collaboration and openness of stakeholder networks in selected food tourism experiences.

Name of the experience	Type of collaboration	Openness
Honey Routes in Rural Larnaca	Formal / hierarchical	Open
Gastronomy Routes Menja't l'Alt Urgell	Informal / consensus	Open
From Farm to Fork	Formal / hierarchical	Closed
Kras/Carso Food Tour	Informal / consensus	Closed

are more suitable for creating successful experiences in food tourism that contribute to local sustainable development. However, it is speculated that more informal and consensus-building decision-making and openness to other stakeholders can facilitate communication between stakeholders and reduce tensions. As stated by Boesen, Sundbo, and Sundbo (2016), this may ultimately lead to a better-fitting logic between stakeholders and better collaboration between them.

The key message is that the mode of stakeholder collaboration greatly depends on the stakeholders' motives and attitudes toward the development of local tourism. If the main motive is more general and long-term (e.g., promotion of the destination in general, or raising awareness about culinary heritage), the type of stakeholders involved and their ways of connecting are completely different: they rely more on central, top-down, and planned communication, usually initiated by a public institution that »invites« local producers to participate. If the motives are more specific and short-term (e.g., an additional channel for selling agricultural products or services), the stakeholders usually act in a more consensual, bottom-up process and can ensure more sustainable activation and enhancement of local food resources. This confirms findings by Šmid Hribar and Ledinek Lozej (2013), who claimed that collaboration between various stakeholders, especially those with knowhow, can effectively secure, activate, and enhance financial and human local resources.

6 Conclusion

This paper provides valuable insights into the origins and relationships between stakeholders involved in food experiences in the Mediterranean area and contributes to research on sustainable development of rural areas based on culinary heritage. Based on twenty-two food tourism experiences, three main conclusions can be drawn.

First, by using top-down or bottom-up approaches, stakeholders tend to connect differently within networks. This is highly dependent on 1) types of experience and 2) the stakeholders' motives and expectations. Stakeholders can be flexible: in one case they may be a holder of an experience that invites other stakeholders, whereas in another they only participate in the presentation of their services and products.

Second, the motives for creating food tourism experiences are numerous and depend on the type of stakeholders involved. Motives range from raising awareness, safeguarding cultural heritage, community building, and knowledge transfer – all of which are significantly linked to food events organized by public institutions – to networking, finding additional sales channels, and extending tourist attractions into the off-season, which is usually presented among service providers and local producers.

Third, this study identified three models of stakeholder networks, observing the hierarchy of stakeholders and their role in creating and managing experiences. The models suggest different forms of collaboration and indicate the directions in which collaboration can develop in future food tourism experiences. In Model 3, in which a holder is a small existing network of entrepreneurs and/or members of the local association and cooperatives, it was observed that collaboration seems to be less open to other stakeholders in the local area, at least in the beginning. Therefore, it needs to be further investigated under which conditions, when, and how stakeholders in the existing network would open up and be willing to involve external stakeholders in their food experiences, and how this would contribute to local territorial development.

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