

# Food and tourism: an exploratory analysis of dishes in Sicilian gastronomic culture

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## Publication Information:

Received 4 March 2023, Accepted 23 June 2023, Available online 24 August 2023

DOI: 10.21463/jmic.2023.12.2.09

## Abstract

Culinary tourism has recently been gaining increasing attention in tourism practice and research. Meat production and consumption also play a significant role in the management and marketing of food tourism. This research explores the role of meat in two high-end restaurants located in the city of Partinico, an agricultural destination in the province of Palermo. The results show the meat identity of both restaurants and reveal how meat-based menus communicate a sense of place centered on local knowledge and the seasonal component of meat products.

## Keywords

Sicily, gastronomic culture, food and tourism, exploratory analysis

## Introduction

The landscape represents a complex ecosystem resulting from the interaction between man and the environment. The interaction between man and the environment shapes the agricultural landscape and makes it a unique feature. In the interaction between man and the environment, man creates activities that he needs to live according to what he knows how to do and according to what the soil and climate allow. Now while it is true that man has created various activities to lead a dignified life, over time these activities have become farms and livestock farms from which food products are produced. The increase in international competition, and the ease of exchanging goods, pose a problem today: how can we make the most of the food excellence of the various territories, especially those that are marginal? Marginality is measured in various ways, but for this paper, marginality is understood as the competitive lack of the enterprise and therefore of the productions it produces (Sgroi, 2022). Valorization can take place in various ways. One way of valorizing the landscape is through food and wine tourism, which is a journey to a place to discover its culinary and gastronomic

heritage – by visiting its cultural and natural heritage (Henderson, 2009; Everett, 2019; Fusté-Forné, 2020). In this respect, the Italian and Sicilian territories are very rich in cultural heritage (sanctuaries, old farmhouses, etc.) and natural beauty that have been preserved over time. Through the rediscovery of these cultural and natural assets, all those food and gastronomic products that would otherwise remain relegated to the margins can find appreciation. In developed economies, food represents a factor of nourishment but also of conviviality, i.e. a moment of unity between people. Food is also a tourist attraction factor i.e. a wide range of experiences involving the exploration of products, dishes, or landscapes (Hall and Sharples, 2003). Food tourists explore a culture through food (Long, 2004), with different levels of involvement defining the experience sought (McKercher, 2020). In particular, the World Food Travel Association (2018) states that 'food and wine tourism is the pursuit and enjoyment of unique and memorable food and wine experiences, both far and near', and adds that the act of traveling for a taste of place allows people to gather a sense of place. Restaurant visits emerge as one of the most relevant spaces to experience gastronomic tourism, as they enhance local products and recipes, and the business also benefits economically in terms of demand for services (Rachão et al., 2019; Knollenberg et al., 2021). Moreover, restaurants play an important role in connecting local products with tourists. One thinks of the enhancement and the possibility of offering local food and wine products. This connection is a potential example of the sustainable bridges that can be created between producers and consumers (Zhang, Chen, and Hu, 2019) as a pathway to contribute to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Sheyvens et al., 2021). We like to think of sustainable development here as a balance between agriculture, industry, and services in a given area. In particular, for food and wine tourism, agriculture provides the agri-food products (which can be consumed in a fresh state such as vegetables, or as products that must undergo initial processing such as milk, cured meats, etc.), industry is that branch of business which in our case is represented by the restaurant industry, the food processing industry and the food distribution industry. But as we have seen, the primary source of food is on farms or livestock farms. In particular, livestock farming for meat is an activity that closely links communities and territories. Meat farming traditions are part of the cultural heritage that is passed down from generation to generation. In this context, the relationship between cultural heritage and tourism development is gaining increasing interest with a growing focus on "rural tourism". While rural tourism is defined by the area in which tourists carry out their activities rather than by the content of the tasks they perform, so that the basis of this type of tourism is the rural environment in the broadest sense, it has an interesting natural, a cultural-historical and architectural heritage that arouses the interest of people who usually live in urban areas and who are willing to 'invest' part of their free time and resources in many cases to reconnect with their origins or simply seek ways or places of holidaying that go beyond their usual standard of living. Rural tourism encompasses any activity that takes place in rural and natural areas, compatible with sustainable development, the latter implying permanence and 'optimal' use of resources, integration of the local population, conservation, and improvement of the environment, as opposed to the concept of maximum profitability. Italy is a leader in rural tourism with more than 24,000 facilities located throughout the peninsula, located far from traditional stops such as cities of art, national monuments, and popular areas. In the year 2019, rural tourism attracted around 14 million individual visits. This success has been effectively halted by the explosion of COVID and travel restrictions, but with more than 25,000 beds and more than 440,000 seats spread across several restaurants, it is in a prime position to come back strong once the global economy begins to push global travel. The term agritourism is specific to culinary tourism. Agritourism is associated with the provision of accommodation, local gastronomy services, and/or activities related to farming in which the tourist can actively participate (e.g. making jam, milking, harvesting, threshing, etc.). Restaurants are the custodians of local food (Bristow and Jenkins, 2018), understood as food that originates in the delimited area (Morris and Buller, 2003) and promotes the development of sustainable tourism (Sims, 2009). Specifically, haute cuisine restaurants contribute to the promotion of food and wine tourism (De Albuquerque, Mundet, and Aulet, 2019). This research addresses rural tourism in the

experience of restaurants affiliated with the Italian Academy of Cuisine as part of local tourism services (Lam-González et al., 2021) understood as food that originates in the delimited area (Morris and Buller, 2003) and promotes the development of sustainable tourism (Sims, 2009). Specifically, haute cuisine restaurants contribute to the promotion of food and wine tourism (De Albuquerque, Mundet, and Aulet, 2019) and promote all those activities aimed at enhancing architectural heritage, landscape, and the environment in general.

## The demand for restaurant services

Food was once essentially relegated to the category of convenience goods, thus acquiring the rank of shopping or even specialty goods. Today, food product satisfies less and less a real nutritional need: the greater diffusion of information and hygienic and health education, as well as the average increase in disposable income, has contributed to shifting demand towards 'better' products and towards services linked to food products, whereby the qualitative factors of the product consequently acquire more and more importance in the purchasing decisions on the end market. The food product must no longer be seen as destined only to satisfy the primary need for food but conceived as a complex object, identified by a 'package of characteristics' and capable of rendering the consumer more services. But it is not only quality considerations that lead the consumer to purchase this or that product: today, consumption is thus largely determined by advertising channels (Sgroi, 2021) by the influence of fashion, as well as by the evolution of society's lifestyles. Advertising is one of how new needs can be created and the concentration processes of the agro-food preservation and processing industry realized, through the dissemination of the image of a standardized product that is recognizable and the same everywhere. Fashion can influence the formation of particular food consumption models: think of the importance of the dietetic (bran, real baby food, etc.) or therapeutic food sector, or the spread of consumption models imported from more industrialized fast food countries. Some authors have emphasized the importance of the imitation effect in the spread of food consumption patterns: they progress over time towards qualitative improvement, being formed from time to time by wealthier consumers; less affluent consumers are subsequently led to adapt the structure of their food consumption by reference to the consumption pattern of the wealthier classes by an imitation effect. This phenomenon can be observed in the city between different social classes, in the city-countryside relationship, and exchanges between industrialized and developing countries. Economic development, with the consequent generalization of wage labor, the spread of women's work, and urbanization, has led to a substantial change in lifestyles and social customs, which inevitably reflect on consumption behavior. For example, the time factor has acquired a fundamental importance in purchasing decisions as there is a tendency to privilege free time and economic time, i.e. time spent on acquiring income, rather than a domestic time for preparing meals. Thus, the number of meals consumed outside the home increases, and so does the consumption of ready-made, packaged, pre-cooked, standardized, and, in short, time-saving food products that can be used in the home kitchen. However, the fact remains that every society produces food ideologies, which can be defined as social attitudes toward good food. And in every territory, food is the result of tradition, knowledge, work, and climate. Thus the food that is made in Sicily is different from that in northern Italy, especially because of the climate. Lately, great importance has also been given to the spread of ecological sensitivity in orienting the final demand toward particular goods or services. There is a constant and generalized revaluation of traditional and fresh products, free of preservatives, colorings, and various additives. The latter is very fashionable, especially in developed economies and post-modern societies. In these socio-economic contexts, we have a food and wine tourism movement that is in search of ancient culinary recipes and typical dishes.

## Materials and methods

This exploratory research aims to analyze the incorporation of meat in the menus of two restaurants belonging to the Italian Academy of Cuisine located in the municipality of Partinico, in the northwestern part of the province of Palermo, Sicily. Previous research shows that Partinico in general and the surrounding area in particular is an area with strong agricultural traditions and is now a destination characterized by pizza-based tourism experiences and a culinary heritage based on typical dishes that contribute to the identity of the Partinico area (Sgroi, 2022). The identity of Partinico area's culinary heritage includes first courses (pasta with broad bean macco, pasta with sardines, pasta with "carrettiera", etc.), meat and fish main courses (meat rolls, breaded meat, meatballs, meat brociolone, sardine meatballs, sardines a beccafico, sardines in sweet and sour sauce, etc.), vegetable main courses that were once served in the past, and which are now served in the city's main squares. ) main courses of vegetables that were once the basis of the poor peasants' cuisine but now side dishes in the post-modern economy (asparagus or potato omelet, sweet and sour pumpkin, fried broccoli, broccoli in batter, aubergine caponata, etc.) and desserts (chickpea or ricotta cassatelle, Sicilian cannoli, San Martino biscuits, rice cakes seasoned with honey, pignocciata, etc.) (Sgroi, 2021). Partinico, 30 km from Palermo, is an area with important agricultural resources. Vegetables, fruit trees, olive trees, vines, and lemons are cultivated in the area, and there is a great tradition of Sicilian cuisine, famous for its first courses, main courses, and also desserts whose importance is recognized internationally as they are products of gastronomy that are part of the Mediterranean diet, which in 2010 was recognized as an intangible heritage of humanity. This qualitative study is based on in-depth interviews with chefs from two restaurants of the Italian Academy of Cuisine. These are well-known restaurants that are part of the "Italian Academy of Cuisine" and offer a menu where meat products and the gastronomic tradition of Palermo play a prominent role. The interviews were constructed based on previous research into 'gastronomic tourism' as a niche form of 'food tourism'. The objective of the interviews was to discuss the value of meat in the identity of haute cuisine restaurants and the protection and promotion of cultural and natural heritage in tourism. Throughout the centuries, the people who have passed through Sicily have left obvious marks on Sicily's farming and gastronomic culture. Among these, pastoralism and animal husbandry represents a distinctive feature of island agriculture. Economically, in the economies of the past, the gastronomic tradition was guaranteed by raw materials from local communities. As far as meat is concerned, it is highlighted that the origin of the raw material was from local farms. The various dominations that have followed one another have also left an imprint on gastronomy that has been handed down from generation to generation and is a source of pride and boast for Sicilians, as well as an important driver of tourist attraction. The earliest records of Sicilian cuisine date back to Greek times. Sicily counts valuable productions that can be traced back to local farming conditions and methods. Making Sicilian cuisine famous among Greek cities was ancient Syracuse: local cooks were in great demand in Athens, Sparta, and Corinth, as they were considered among the most skilled. It was precisely in Sicily that some important figures in the culinary world were born, such as Labdaco of Syracuse and Miteco Siculus, who made himself the author of the first cookbook in history, as well as Arcestrato of Gela, considered the father of critics of the culinary art (Mollo, 2007). In this, it is possible to say that Sicily is a pleasant discovery not only on the level of territory but especially for its culinary prestige, with an undisputed richness that is the basis of the Mediterranean diet and style. It is no coincidence that the Mediterranean diet itself has been included by UNESCO in the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Sgroi et al., 2022). The interviews were conducted in October 2022 and analyzed using qualitative data analysis software. The results of the analysis are displayed in the next section with direct quotes from the interviewees illustrating the meanings inherent in a narrative based on the meat dishes of Palermo's gastronomic tradition.

## Results and discussions

As a result of interviews with the chefs of the two surveyed restaurants, this research discusses the role of local meat dishes as a driver of local tourist food consumption. Meat dishes represent a sense of terroir. "We are a restaurant with the tradition of Palermo cuisine," one of the two chefs. The meat is usually sourced from local farms, and the vegetables are from local fruit and vegetable markets or short-supply chain farmers. In particular, the chefs told us that 'we only cook local meat that comes from farms in our land where the animals eat Sicilian fodder. The local origin of food increases tourist attraction as visitors look for products related to the region they are visiting (Timothy and Ron, 2013). The chef of the first restaurant tells us that 'we feel called to bring meat as a standard of our territory, and our identity. It's not just a speech, it's a conviction, to rely on our product is to say who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. His way of protecting the livestock heritage and promoting an authentic gastronomic service is 'to make the people who sit at our tables live a narrative with the essence of our know-how and based on the best product. It is a product that tells of the purity of nature and respect for the ecosystem. For example, Figure 1 illustrates (beef) roulades à la palermitana, an example of a local product that emerges as an identifying sign of the restaurant and illustrates the significance of meat that is sourced from local butchers, showing a direct link between the land and the table.



Fig 1. Roulades palermitana style

Knowledge of the area is essential to know, for example, 'that the meat of the cinisara breed is full of antioxidants, has a red color and is tasty, all characteristics that are given to it by the presence of iron. In addition, mineral salts and antioxidants are important, giving them a high nutritional value. This is why it has organoleptic qualities not found in other breeds. The milk of the cinisara cow is rich in polyphenols, terpenes, and Omega 3 and 6 unsaturated fats. Its aromas are typical of the forage essences of the bush on which it feeds. In addition, there is a very important seasonal



component that is also reflected in restaurant menus, as one chef states that 'we cook meat-based main courses all year round, such as the roulades palermitana style and the breaded roast palermitana' (Fig. 2).



Fig 2. Breaded roast in the Palermo style

There are meat-based main courses such as 'meatballs with sauce' (Fig. 3) or 'brociolone' (Fig. 4) which are more autumn/winter dishes depending on the high calories they provide and are 'heavy foods to digest'.



Fig 3. Meatballs with sauce Palermo style

This is also recognized as part of the authenticity of food and wine tourism, which claims that a food is authentically experienced in the place where it grows and at the right time. Both chefs stated that meat can be found anywhere in the world, but the products do not have the quality and taste of those that come from the fodder typical of the mountains of Palermo where the Cinisara cattle breed is raised.



Fig 4. Palermitan brociolone

Food landscapes represent a cultural heritage that imprints the taste of meat and also on the value chain of meat products (meatballs, rolls, etc.). For example, one chef states that 'cinisara meat has a strong taste, whereas modicana meat has a less intense taste. The color is different and the taste is different because it depends on the soil and climatic conditions. The characteristics of the land landscapes make the product unique, linked to a specific space and time.

## Conclusions

The results of this exploratory research provide a preliminary understanding of meat as an identical product that reflects not only a locally based menu but also the process of assigning tourism value to the culture and nature associated with a place through the 'meat dish'. This research offers an initial discussion on the use of meat as a gastronomic and catering product, also about the incorporation of local and non-local livestock products by Italian cuisine academy restaurants. Meat dishes as a gastronomic product are a crucial ingredient of restaurant experiences as part of gastronomic tourism, and this research addresses this niche form of culinary tourism from the perspective of the delivery of meat products to customers' palates in fine dining. This has several theoretical and practical implications that take the form of the need to protect local seafood products and the cultural and natural heritage of livestock and local people; to encourage the seasonality of local products over permanent global products to design menus that change each season and to rely on the availability of indigenous food products; combine local products from animal husbandry with those from the land (vegetables for side dishes) to reinforce the narrative message of responsible cooking and sustainable consumption, to further enhance the territory according to what nature offers us; promote meat at source to recognize the gastronomic value of a local, fresh and quality product. The results also serve to better plan local tourism experiences based on meat

products, which must rely on sustainable relationships between animal husbandry and tourism in the context of food and wine tourism. As seen today, the tourist seeks the gastronomic tradition of the area, and reasoning in terms of supply, from the interviews with chefs, restaurant businesses offer precisely these products as a heritage of the area and therefore a source of competitive advantage for the area itself.

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