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CAPITALISING LOCAL FOOD FOR GASTRO-TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Food industries are essential to shaping and structuring destination food tourism focus and the overall food industry. By highlighting regional distinctiveness and the contribution of local food to distinctive visitor experiences as well as boosting the local economy, destinations and food producers or businesses must recognize the significance of local food and gastronomy experience in tourism. This research used qualitative techniques and was conducted in the states of Pahang and Terengganu in East Coast Malaysia (ECM). Since food production in ECM is one of the key contributions to the regional economy and a significant locally-owned industry, 13 food producers were picked for the interviews. Food producers are therefore essential for a destination to ensure that the local cuisine satisfies tourists' growing interest in and demand for local cuisine as well as their quest for an exceptional local food experience. In this regard, the research incorporated the viewpoints of the ECM local food producers to offer a beneficial and substantial contribution to developing gastrotourism and destinations.

Keywords: Gastronomy Tourism, Culinary Tourism, Food Production, Local Food

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INTRODUCTION

Gastronomy tourism or gastro-tourism is one of a subgroup of cultural tourism, with local food being an essential destination attribute because production is a locally embedded activity which emphasises cultural distinctiveness, authenticity, and sense of place, thereby, facilitating competitive advantage for destinations and tourism businesses (Tang, Thomas & Fisher, 2022, Robinson & Getz, 2016). However, not until 2000s, the interlinked between food and tourism has only begun to get recognised as a niche tourism segment (see e.g., Hall & Sharples, 2003). Studies linking local food with the economics of agricultural production, supply and tourism date back to the early 1970s and 1980s. Seminal studies on the development of tourism and agriculture linkages include Gooding (1971); Belisle (1983, 1984); and, Momsen (1972, 1986). Momsen's (1972) classic study of the Caribbean describes the integration of food production and tourism in the Caribbean as challenging. Similarly, other related studies cite the failures and constraints of combining production and tourism as an important economic activity in the Caribbean (e.g., Momsen, 1973; Belisle 1983; Telfer and Wall, 1996).

In recent years, more studies highlight gastronomy experience as a beneficial tool to market destinations and market diversification by centralizing food tourism experience, to attract more tourists, aside from the 'typical' sun and sea holidaymakers during the peak season (Garanti & Stylianou, 2022). Studies from Testa et al. (2019), Kurt and Dluzewska (2018) and Skryl et al. (2018) depict that gastro- tourism has transform into one of the most creative and dynamic segments in nations such as Italy and Croatia. Given the emerging yet strong global interest in food as a key tourism segment proposed that the touristic experience is complex and is formed pre, during, and post-travel in a detailed way, but what travelers recall after a trip is mostly the unique and unexpected food experiences they had, which are different from other experiences (Park & Santos, 2017). The key to creating an experience versus one encounter of good food or atmosphere is to consider all factors related to the food or drink consumed, location or setting, companions, the occasion, and touristic elements of novelty and authenticity (Stone et al., 2022). Moreover, for a gastro-experience to become memorable, sensory connections, emotional connections, social and interpersonal connections, novelty, and experimental connections, focus and attention and reflective connections are all involved.

Based on the above's notion, Haven-Tang, Thomas, and Fisher (2022) mention that profiting from linkages in gastro-tourism can also help food producers, as tourists and tourism businesses are drawn to short food supply chains where they can purchase products directly from the producer or through local retailers in the destination, lowering costs for food producers, boosting local economies, and re-connecting food production and consumption with the place. Yeoman et al. (2015) discuss numerous goals that can be achieved with this

strategy, including promoting destination growth and distinctiveness through geographic connections and upending conventional food supply.

As the culinary ecosystem become a significant part of the tourism offer, it is essential to focus on building partnerships, collaboration and networks, thereby facilitating the creation of collaborative tourism products and experiences (see Azinuddin et al., 2020; 2022a; Jolliffe, 2016). For instance, Cyprus unveiled two projects focused on gastro-tourism, namely 'Taste Cyprus' and 'Cyprus Breakfast', with the goal of bringing together key players in the sector and developing distinctive gastronomic experiences (Haven-Tang, Thomas & Fisher, 2022). Through projects and funding, this kind of strategic collaboration initiative between public, private and hybrid stakeholders can act as a catalyst for cluster development by creating a forum for collaboration (see Mior Shariffuddin et al., 2020).

Although it may seem counterintuitive to work together with a rival, studies have shown that when tourism businesses are interlinked, they produce dynamic synergies becoming more inventive and boosting their performances and competition (Romanova et al., 2019; Pan et al., 2018; Kim & Shim, 2018;). Local foods are becoming an increasingly important component of the tourism industry. With collaboration between gastronomic businesses and tourism industries, gastro-tourism clusters can be fully developed and operated. According to reports, effective marketing of culinary experiences largely depends on the overall strategy, cooperation among all stakeholders, leadership, and communication that improves tourist consumption experiences (Ottenbacher & Harrington, 2013). Morrison et al. (2018) depict tourism as a system instead of an industry made up of numerous interconnected subsystems. For example, one particular dish or drink at a restaurant cannot drive tourism on its own; instead, it is a cooperation between tourism attractions, lodging establishments, accessibility and transportation service providers, amenities that together give the tourists a complete experience (Garanti & Stylianou, 2022).

Therefore, it is important to take a universal perspective and recognise that the benefits that local food can offer to tourism correlate with the actions of producers or suppliers as well as the behaviour of tourists (Lin and Mao, 2015). By doing so, gastro-tourism production needs the clear vision and drive of passionate locals food industries to begin their development via tourism (Alonso et al., 2018). The connections made through gastro-tourism activities can serve as a forum for interaction and the sharing of shared values between producers and visitors. It can be incorporated into a more comprehensive framework because, according to Hkansson and Snehota (1990), connections are crucial to the success of any food business.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The definition of "gastronomy", "food" and "culinary" are interchangeable when referring to the range of gastronomy tourism activities and products, which encompasses a wide variety of gourmet, cuisine, or food-oriented activities (De Jong et al., 2018; Ellis et al., 2018; Sotiriadis, 2015). Gastro-tourism refers to the pursuit of attractive, authentic, memorable culinary experiences of all kinds while travelling internationally, regionally or even locally which can be a driver of destination choice, especially for emerging markets (Arcana & Mahadewi, 2019). Arcana and Mahadewi also assert that studies on gastro-tourism cultivated diverse themes including gastro-tourists' experiences, culinary trends, sustainable tourism, food choice and destination tourism, and the motivation and destination choice for gastro-tourism. These integrated themes value tourists' perception and experience as an important role in tourism destinations' sustained growth, success, and competitiveness (Azinuddin et al., 2022b).

As a counterbalance to mass tourism, this interactive form of gastro-tourism is quickly gaining popularity. It deals with participation within a geographic area and can draw expensive tourists (Everett, 2012, 2016; Fusté-Forné & Berno; 2016; Novelli, 2005). Gastro-tourism entails changes from more conventional service-heavy tourism to experiential pursuits this market is attracting food enthusiasts who go behind the scenes to experiment with unusual flavors and ingredients and learn about regional foods or beverages from cultural experts (Williams, Yuan, & William Jr, 2019; Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2013).

Building a comprehensive gastro-tourism is part of a systematic network of production; in this case, tourism alone is not able to increase the value of quality food or vice versa (Montanary & Staniscia, 2009). In tourism, interaction is a key characteristic as a result of simultaneous production and consumption (Chathoth et al., 2018) or 'pro-sumption'. Co-creation entails a deeper customer engagement and a deeper emphasis on the experience created during the network interaction between the producer and the value received by the tourists. In this regard, value creation in tourism experiences particularly emphasises the role of tourists as consumers, service providers as producers/suppliers, and the destination set in the co-creation process (Prebensen, Chen, & Uysal, 2018). Co-creating values occur when the production process in gastro-tourism is conceptually equivalent to the production of a tourist food experience. It is also connected to the collective effort of a number of actors and food producers which are increasingly an integral part of destination development across the world (Andersson et al., 2017).

However, past failures to predict linkages of gastro-tourism provide evidence of the complex relationship between food production and tourism (Momsen 1998; Telfer and Wall, 1996, 2000). Using evidence from the early 2000s, Torres (2003) makes the following claims about the elements that

influence the development of reciprocal links between food production and tourism:

- Demand-related;
- Supply or production-related; and
- Marketing/intermediate related

There have been a small number of studies, such as Torres (2003), Green and Dougherty (2008), Horng and Tsai (2012), and Frisvol et al. (2016) that developed comprehensive research that go beyond in-depth analyses to examine the interplay between tourism, food production, consumption, or tourist demand. Additionally, Park and Widayanta (2022) demonstrate that there is a direct relationship between co-production and customization and their impact on the diversity and identity of regional foods. The creation and marketing of food experiences should consider the potential positive and negative effects on regional gastronomic diversity and identity.

There are three stages in the evolution of gastronomy travel experiences related to the production of themed experiences for consumers, value co-creation between food tourism supply and demand and gastronomic experiences position for the growth of communities and food (Prayang & Dixit, 2022; Pratt et al., 2020; Richards, 2015). This implies a deeper integration of gastro-tourism into regional development, sustainability, and local food systems. Local gastronomy, in particular, sheds light on the host culture, heritage, and traditions at one end but also develops a sense of pride amongst the community at the other end (Dixit, 2019), while also providing opportunities for both rural and urban communities to participate in the tourism industry.

Despite the quality devoted to assessing and reducing the tourism and production scarcities, this literature still needs to identify the most effective strategy or process to merge production-tourism linkages. Many prior studies (e.g., Andreatta 1998; Belisle, 1983, 1984; Momsen, 1998; Telfer & Wall 1996, 2000) lack the holistic approach needed to investigate tourism and production linkages that extend beyond a narrow assessment of certain geographical locations or food systems. Local food tourism in other words requires strategic decisions about supplying food products and services relevant to particular types of tourists. In addition, the organisational micro-dynamics of the interaction between private and public actors within food and tourism and around the destination become a specific focus point because it is through these interactions that particular food experiences for tourism consumption are selected, communicated, and made available for consumption (Halkier, 2012).

There are a number of solutions that could be implemented in ECM to close the gap in the food tourism value chain, predominantly to conduct contractual relationships by being proactive in creating local networks of

collaboration with other food and tourism stakeholders or organisations. This result is consistent with Mei, Lerfald, and Bråtå's (2017) observations, according to which a project funded by the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) in Austria aimed to promote the modernization of the European agri-food sector by bringing consumers and local farms together through the use of technologies like smartphone apps. Gastro-tourism strategies are supported by local agricultural/food policies, despite the fact that the main agenda may not be considered to be tourism-focused or to be only partially related to tourism because they can assist the agriculture, agri-food, and food industry in addressing some of their key issues with economic instability (Telfer and Hashimoto, 2013: 174).

To reduce the obstacles in the process of food production and connection with the tourism business, steps must be taken to develop the link between local food businesses and tourists. This study emphasises a model of the tourism production function from Smith (1994), which shows how tourism production requires the active involvement of consumers in the production. As illustrated in Figure 1, Smith's model of the tourism production function is used to further validate gastro-tourism development for local food in synergizing the collaborative approach to redefine how food producers, consumers, and suppliers should not be conceptualised as separate entities. Smith stated that because there is no solitary production method, uniform output, and geographically restricted market, tourism is not an "industry" in the traditional sense.

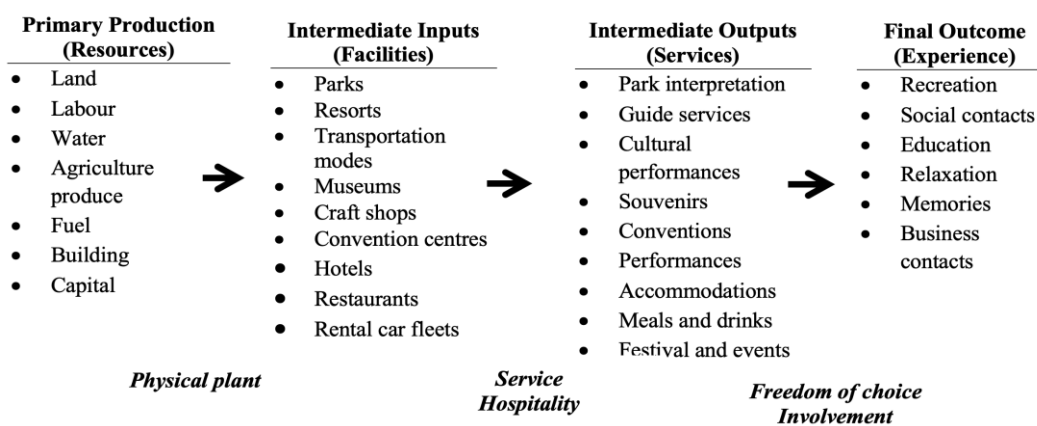


Figure 1: Smith Tourism Production Function
Source: Smith (1994)

The Smith (1994) model highlights a tool for bridging production-consumption linkages: it begins with upstream activities (primary production or resources) and concludes with a downstream activity (outcome). Smith pointed

out that the consumer experience is the result of the tourism product. It is an integrating pattern of transforming resources into values (product or service) to experience (satisfaction), which ultimately apply to what is referred to as tourism idiosyncrasies or the nature of tourism. The distribution creates values that do not end through purchasing activities (customer). In this context, the model provides a different interpretation of the nature of the relationships by taking into account potential drivers of tourist food consumption, such as motivation, demographic change, and local product knowledge (e. g. Kim and associates. (2009) and (2013); Kim and Eves (2012); Mak et al., 2012). In the idea put forth by Madaleno et al. (2018), the gastro-tourism connections show an important potential mechanism for boosting local production, keeping tourism revenue in the area, and enhancing the distribution of tourism benefits or value creation to visitors and local society.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The semi-structured interviews represent this study's qualitative approach and elicit the interviewee's ideas and opinions on the topic of interest. For that reason, the interview used in this study is to validate the influence and effect of food production on the development of the local gastro-tourism movement. The questions are solely developed to measure the view of local food producers about the presence of food tourism, and how they would be able to relate it to the current situation and market values. In particular, each state of Pahang and Terengganu provided diverse groups of food producers that actively produce and operate food businesses, involving seven producers in the different areas in Kuala Terengganu and another six producers were situated in Pahang, and all the respondents are coded as producer P1-P13. The interviews were held at all the business premises and the business owners and managing directors participated in the sessions. The length of each interview was between 1-1.5 hours. The information collected in the semi-structured interview was transcribed from the recorded interviews and translated from Malay to English. Based on the finalized transcripts of all 13 interviews, each of them was categorized and grouped into several main themes using thematic analysis.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Local food producers can have an impact on the growth of food tourism by using the "added-value" aspect of already-existing tourism products. The study shows that links between local food production and tourism, especially in ECM, need to undergo significant changes because they are a major driver of additional but crucial economic activity. The evidence presented in this study suggested that food produced by local producers could play a crucial role in bolstering the destination's tourism industry by transforming food resources (e.g., raw materials, and money) into a travel-related food product.

The production process, according to Smith (1994), initially results in two distinct characteristics: (i) added value is injected at every stage of the process, and (ii) the consumer becomes a crucial component of the entire process because the experience of a tourism product is only possible if a consumer (tourist) activates the process and actively participates in the final phase. The physical plant, service, hospitality, freedom of choice, and involvement are the additional five components that make up the tourism manufacturing process. These are intended to be the key building blocks in creating the tourism product, which is then supported by the tourism production process, as indicated in Table 1.

The physical plant part transforms into a generic product between the primary production and intermediate input stages. Service and hospitality are added as intermediate inputs to be processed into intermediate outcomes. The last stage of the tourist experience is when the freedom of choice and participation are translated into the overall results of the intermediate results. The original tourism manufacturing method differed in several aspects compared to the modified model. However, it is still being determined how well the model in Figure 1 will adapt to different tourism products, including food and diverse tourist perspectives. Smith's work needed a factual foundation and was conceptual confined. Therefore, this study looks at food products and how they have been adapted for a specific tourism market to operationalize a new framework based on Table 1. The interview questions were constructed around four themes, and several reconstructed sub-themes that were linked to the inputs of the tourism production process model.

Table 1 : Themes and subthemes of semi-structured interview questions with food producers

Themes
Primary production (resources) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Raw item resources ● Product concepts, characteristics and volumes
Intermediary inputs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Customer and marketing ● The role of value/supply chain system
Intermediary outputs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Export and trade strategies ● Regional tourism development
Tourist involvement and experience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gastronomy tourist-oriented product strategy

Source: Adapted from Smith (1994)

Primary production (resources)

The first inputs (resources) identify the ways in which producers self-planted, acquired, supplied, or exploited basic materials. More significantly, it was also proposed that the main input produced a solid foundation at the local level, based on a specialisation that is supported by the producer's capacity to produce/manufacture goods with distinguishing or distinctive qualities. This comprises the ability to make items with distinctive traits, (ii) innovation, (iii) the ability to create things or materials that are not available elsewhere, and (iv) a distinctive image associated with a specific geographic place (Musso & Francioni, 2015). Both producers, P10 and P6 reached a consensus on their self-purchasing resource decisions based on such beliefs. Producer P10 indicated that:

“Currently I buy the raw materials directly from factories that provide the ingredients I needed in Kuantan, Pahang. Because if I wanted to buy them from far away like in Penang, I would need a bigger capital to manage it.”

Producer P6 verified:

“We get the dried spices by ourselves because there is a shop which we used to get the spices from them and they already knew what the spices that we need.”

According to the investigation's findings, Pahang and Terengganu's food product inventions and diversifications had different characteristics. Compared to Terengganu's farmers, who mostly focused on fish-based food items, Pahang's producers are more "adventurous" in manufacturing various types of food products from various resources, according to producer P2:

“We decided to go for fish crackers and fish sausages because it is one of Terengganu's signature foods. Besides that, Terengganu is also well known for its turtle eggs and nasi dagang (traditional rice with fish gravy). Originally, we planned to open a food stall if our fish crackers business does not survive but now since the business runs smoothly, we just proceed.”

On the other hand, one example derived from the data was producer P8 in Pahang who produced a diverse range of agricultural-food based products including fruits, vegetables, palm oil, livestock, honey and freshwater fish.

Intermediary inputs

In order to provide the "platform" for the product to reach the tourist market, effective intermediaries are required in the production process of food tourism. The internal and external mediators for product distributions were connected to the input and output of intermediaries. Before the commercial transaction occurs in the intermediary outputs, the intermediary inputs serve as management

inputs/tools, including managerial or operational expertise and knowledge, technical services, and food packaging. It is evident that the manufacturers were able to target their promotional efforts to appeal to people from a variety of demographic backgrounds thanks to their understanding of consumers and marketing. Because they are better familiar with the food goods produced, certain producers are specifically targeting local consumers and visitors who are of particular ethnic groups, primarily Malay users, as described by producer P12:

“The target is the Malay. The spices that we produce are compatible with the tastes of the Malays and the targeted demographic is a family group. That is our target. Because mostly are Malays who love to eat the opor and gulai kawah as well.”

The research also showed that ECM producers understood how marketing opened up the appropriate channel, improved their performance and operations, and made them more competitive with other commercial food goods. For instance, Producer P12 specifically targeted local Malay households for his cooking paste products, whereas Producer P3 invested heavily in the neighbourhood football club to reach a bigger audience of buyers outside of Terengganu.

Undoubtedly, the value chain plays a significant role in organising the product till it reaches the final consumer in a methodical sequence. Producers could decide who and where to distribute their goods to, as well as how much they could spend on hiring the channel stakeholders. most of the meals, As stated by producer P2:

“Oh yes, we have a retailer, and they will come to buy in bulk and sell our products outside of Terengganu. For example, they will buy 200 or 300 sticks and mark up the price in Kuala Lumpur, and normally they are our close friends. Local people will come and buy directly from us. We also have agents, but not the registered one that has the government licence. They are more to a personal or individual party that will sell our product outside in a small scale.”

One aspect derived from the discussion of the value chain system in SMEs food production business is that depending on the producer's financial and physical capacities, the system may be completely exploited. As it entails a very strict commitment to fully occupy the value/supply chain system that is influenced by the changing market changes and economic conditions, they won't implement the system unless they have a proper and adequate capacity to supply the items from one channel to another.

Intermediary outputs

According to Smith (1994), the intermediary output is made up of services that are typically connected to the tourism sector but are still considered potential commodities. The three aforementioned factors—regional tourism growth, export and trade plans, and tourist influences—were the primary drivers of include ECM culinary products in the tourism service platform. Producer P4 has facilitated platforms and chances for international market expansion for, she established, in terms of export and trade:

“So far we have a good market demand in Singapore. With help from MATRADE, we could bring our products into the UK market, but to establish in the UK, we must keep on with their standards. For example, we have to send our product for a sample there and the cost is so expensive, about 4, 000 Pound Sterling, so I have to it let go first. In Manchester, I also market my product in the Malaysian Food Supermarket. That one is online e-commerce. With help from MOA, I can supply my products to Brunei and Australia as well. I am now seeking the opportunity to market my product to China, Saudi Arabia and Germany.”

Several producers who had market their food products abroad (e.g., Singapore, the Middle East, Australia, Thailand) have provided compelling evidence of the potential for local producers to "internationalise" their businesses. These producers did so in order to secure network collaborations with local stakeholders, tourists, and foreign investors. Endorsing the food product while simultaneously marketing ECM (via food) as a destination for food and tourism and obtaining worldwide exchanges for the advantages of the socio-economic developments in ECM are both parts of the two strategic directions.

Moving on to the following sub-theme, tourism is included in this context as part of a destination development strategy that considers network engagement with local producers, stakeholders, and communities. The growth of destination tourism involves more than just building physical "attractions" to draw tourists. In this context, producer P4 bluntly commented:

“How I’m going to say this; tourism development is still in a slow phase. It needs some improvements, for business persons like us, we never been introduced by any tourist segments yet. I think most of us only believe that tourism is all about beautiful places and attractions, but gastro-tourism is not yet being recognized and understood in that kind of perspective. I received a customer’s suggestion on this matter before this

According to producer P4, the Terengganu tourism development strategy has hit a rough patch due to serious problems with local business participation and a lack of efficient marketing. The growth of local tourism is mainly focused on the already available things (islands, beaches, nature, and eco-

tourism). Since a long time ago, marketing has tended to focus on a group of comparable attractions, and tourism-related events and programmes are run using a broad strategy rather than a focused one.

Tourist involvement and experience

The final element of the process focuses on how the gastro-tourism service enhances the visitor's experience. The food producers in the study decided how to respond to the needs and characteristics of tourists based on their understanding of food tourism and the development of tourist-oriented products. It is one of the main strategies conducted by producer P3 as she explained:

“Yes, my products considered as tourist-oriented products. Now I am in the process to make the savoury sauce, shrimp in chili paste and anchovy chili pastes in a sachet so that it easier for tourist or people who travel. We have also sent our products to ERAMAN Shop, in Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) and surprisingly they have repeated the order from us twice.”

Product diversity and product concentration are two categories into which producer techniques can be divided (Benur & Bremwell, 2015). The growth of tourism destinations depends heavily on these strategies, which are highlighted by the creation of key tourism food products. Even though many producers were aware of the advantages and significance of tourism for the food production industry and destination development, the impact of gastro-tourism also received conflicting interpretations and the implementation is limited in ECM. Producer P5 addressed the issues of scarcity in gastro-tourism:

“For local, I could not engage very well on the business opportunity, because there are abundances of food products in Terengganu and the competition is quite stiff.”

Producer P11 added to the arguments:

“In terms of business, our core product is Sambal Hitam, but not well-promoted or highlighted. The business opportunities in Pahang are excellent, but one thing's needed is the rigorous support from the state government and state tourism as well.”

Despite the necessity to increase food product competition and government support, which is mentioned in both of the aforementioned justifications, the data showed that product concentration and diversification were effective incentives for ECM food producers to engage tourists. This implies that there is increasing interest in gastro-tourism and that it has considerable potential

to support destination development and boost visitor satisfaction in ECM. However, there are obstacles to strengthening the connections between the "tourist" component and the production process. The industry has to develop a better geographical distribution so culinary tourism may be promoted as trails rather than just by individual businesses if it is to flourish in the destination and reap economic benefits (e.g., Green and Dougherty, 2008). Despite its benefits for the economy, tourism has significantly contributed to habitat fragmentation, overtourism, adverse social and cultural effects, and environmental degradation (Rasdi et al., 2022). In the foresight, the product needs to be improved with greater business information on tourist food demand (for example, food motive, demographic features), which might effectively help commercialise food products as an important part of a vacation and allow the necessary source to be used wisely.

CONCLUSION

The interaction of ECM food producers with destination gastro-tourist development was framed using Smith's (1994) tourism production process. According to Robinsons and Getz (2016), the production process is a methodical approach to the food tourism supply system (from resources to ultimate output: tourist experience), and it is in line with the demand and expanding interests of the ECM tourist food engagement. Rethinking food production can give the local tourism sector a competitive edge by adding value to food-based tourism offerings.

This study supports the notion that the model raises a number of significant issues that warrant investigation. How do local food producers bargain with distributors, suppliers, vendors, and retailers when making financial decisions? The significance of local food networks with tourism (among stakeholders and tourism providers) poses crucial difficulties with regard to generating food products for tourism. What additional value do food goods add to increase tourist food consumption? How much do visitors interact with local production landscapes through their consumption activities, shaping them or being shaped by them? These questions highlight the significant food and tourist difficulties that the ECM region is dealing with and that may be resolved, developed, and improved upon by the disclosure of an integrative production-consumption system for gastronomy and tourism.

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