



Guest Satisfaction and Culinary Tourism in Split: An Analysis of Gastronomic Offerings and Visitor Experience

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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to examine tourist satisfaction with selected elements of the gastronomic offer in the city of Split. Satisfaction is increasingly becoming the core reason why tourists choose certain destinations, especially as global tourism shifts from sightseeing to experience-based travel. Gastronomy, once perceived merely as a complementary element of the tourist experience, now serves as a strategic factor in destination branding, emotional engagement, and loyalty building. This research aims to demonstrate that a high-quality gastronomic offer not only enhances tourist satisfaction but also increases the likelihood of return visits, particularly when that offer reflects contemporary global trends and local authenticity. The theoretical part of the paper defines key concepts such as consumer satisfaction, tourism satisfaction, quality as a determinant of satisfaction, and tourist loyalty. Gastronomy is analyzed within the broader tourism context, followed by an overview of international gastronomic trends, categorized into structural and culinary innovation dimensions. The empirical section is based on a field survey conducted among 60 international tourists visiting Split during the summer of 2022. Results indicate a generally positive impact of gastronomy on tourist satisfaction, with notable praise for staff professionalism, ambiance, and flexible working hours. However, gastronomy is still underutilized as a primary travel motivator. The study concludes by recommending strategic initiatives aimed at more fully integrating gastronomy into Split's tourism development framework.

Subject Areas

Business Analysis

Keywords

Gastronomy, Tourist Satisfaction, Quality of Service, Split, Loyalty, Tourism

1. Introduction

In the evolving landscape of global tourism, experiential elements—particularly gastronomy—are becoming central to how travelers engage with destinations [1]. Tourists are no longer content with passive sightseeing; they seek experiences that provide emotional, cultural, and sensory enrichment. Gastronomic tourism, also known as food tourism, is a growing segment that reflects this paradigm shift. It is not only a means of sustenance but a gateway into the cultural fabric of a region.

Split, a coastal Mediterranean city with a rich culinary heritage and access to fresh, seasonal ingredients, possesses strong foundations for developing a robust gastronomic tourism offer. Despite this, the city's food culture is often overshadowed by its historical landmarks and coastal attractions. This study explores the role that gastronomy plays in shaping tourist experiences in Split and evaluates whether it influences satisfaction, return intentions, and overall destination loyalty.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Tourist Satisfaction and Loyalty

Tourist satisfaction can be defined as the emotional response resulting from a comparison between expectations and the actual tourism experience [2]. High levels of satisfaction lead to increased visitor loyalty, including the likelihood of repeat visits and the spread of positive word-of-mouth recommendations [3]. Elements such as perceived service quality, value for money, and emotional engagement significantly influence satisfaction levels [4]. In line with this [5], examination was made between the relationship and destination image, perceived quality, satisfaction, intention to return, and willingness to recommend. Their findings showed that a positive destination image enhances perceived quality, which in turn increases satisfaction, the intention to return, and the likelihood of recommending the destination. While perceived quality influences both satisfaction and revisit intentions, its effect on recommendations was not confirmed. Conversely, satisfaction strongly drives positive word-of-mouth, but does not necessarily lead to repeat visits. In this context, loyalty in tourism extends beyond repeat visitation and includes both behavioral intentions and attitudinal loyalty. Gastronomy, when executed effectively, can play a key role in fostering both forms of loyalty.

2.2. Gastronomy as a Driver of Destination Appeal

Gastronomy plays an increasingly prominent role in shaping destination image and tourist behavior. Culinary experiences create a strong sensory connection and cultural identification, allowing tourists to engage with the local environment in a more meaningful way [6].

Gastronomic tourists can be categorized into four motivational types [7]:

- **Existential:** Seek authentic, often traditional culinary experiences.
- **Experimental:** Desire innovative, novel gastronomic experiences.
- **Recreational:** Interested in socializing and leisure through food.
- **Diversiory:** Engage with food casually, without deeper cultural interest.

Understanding these types enables destinations to tailor offerings to diverse tourist profiles.

2.3. Global and Regional Trends in Gastronomic Tourism

Several key trends are shaping the evolution of gastronomic tourism:

- **Sustainability:** Emphasis on local sourcing, seasonal menus, and eco-conscious practices.
- **Health-conscious consumption:** Increased demand for vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, and low-calorie options.
- **Authenticity and storytelling:** Tourists value menus that reflect cultural narratives and historical roots.
- **Experiential dining:** Growth in interactive experiences such as food markets, cooking classes, and farm-to-table dining.

In the Mediterranean region, destinations like Italy and Greece have successfully integrated gastronomy into their tourism identities. Croatia, particularly Split, has the potential to emulate these examples through strategic alignment with global best practices.

3. Methodology

This research employed a quantitative approach, using a structured questionnaire to gather primary data. Respondents were recruited in-person using a convenience sampling method, targeting international tourists visiting Split during the peak tourist season (June 2022). As such, the findings may not be generalisable to the broader tourist population due to potential sampling bias. The final sample included 60 participants, which, although modest, is in line with previous small-sample studies in tourism research that emphasize depth over breadth [8]. The sample was diverse in terms of age, nationality, and travel motivations.

The questionnaire comprised five key sections:

1) Demographics: Gender, age, country of origin, travel companions, and purpose of visit.

2) Gastronomic behaviors: Dining frequency, types of cuisine consumed, and interest in food-related tourism activities.

3) Satisfaction and availability evaluation: Participants rated various aspects of the gastronomic offer on a 5-point Likert scale. Respondents rated their satisfaction with various elements of Split's gastronomic offer on a five-point Likert scale (1—extremely dissatisfied, 2—dissatisfied, 3—neutral, 4—satisfied, 5—extremely satisfied). Additionally, they evaluated the availability of specific gastronomic components using a five-point scale (1—not available at all, 2—poorly available, 3—moderately available, 4—well available, 5—excellently available).

Respondents also rated their overall satisfaction with Split's gastronomic offer using the same satisfaction scale. The exact Likert-scale items used for the evaluation of satisfaction and availability are listed in **Appendix A**.

4) Perception of gastronomy's role: To assess how food experiences influenced their overall trip.

5) Open-ended feedback: Space for qualitative comments and improvement suggestions.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean values and frequencies), while qualitative responses were thematically coded to identify recurring patterns and insights.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Respondents

Gender: Out of 60 tourists surveyed, 33 were women (55.00%) and 27 were men (45.00%).

Country of Origin: The most represented country was the UK (33.33%), followed by Germany (15.00%), and Poland (6.67%). The sample was highly heterogeneous, with respondents from 18 different countries.

Age: The majority were aged 18 - 29 (n = 31), while only 4 were aged 60+.

Education: Most respondents had a bachelor's degree (n = 27), followed by master's (n = 17), secondary school (n = 11), postgraduate (n = 4), and primary school (n = 1).

Monthly Income: The highest number of respondents earned €2000 - 2999 per month (23.33%), followed by those earning €5000 or more (21.67%).

4.2. Satisfaction with Individual Elements of the Gastronomic Offer (See Table 1)

Table 1. Tourist satisfaction levels regarding different aspects of gastronomic tourism in Split.

Aspect	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Restaurant variety	4.08	0.80
Menu creativity	3.57	0.82
Service quality	4.05	0.80
Staff behavior	4.00	0.77
Reservation procedure	4.00	0.93
Parking availability	2.88	0.98
Hygiene level	4.22	0.75
Employees' language skills	4.48	0.72
Interior design	4.28	0.84
Value for money	3.57	0.80
Atmosphere	4.45	0.62
Food delivery availability	4.12	0.80
Working hours flexibility	4.50	0.67

Tourists rated their overall satisfaction with Split's gastronomic offer at **4.05 out of 5**, indicating a generally positive experience.

- **Employees language skills (M = 4.48)**: English proficiency and friendliness were frequently praised.
- **Atmosphere (M = 4.45)**: Outdoor dining, sea views, and relaxed environments enhanced the experience.
- **Working hours flexibility (M = 4.50)**: Many establishments operated beyond typical hours, accommodating tourist schedules.

These findings are consistent with prior studies emphasizing the importance of emotional ambiance in gastronomic satisfaction [9].

4.3. Availability of Specific Gastronomic Offerings in Split (See Table 2)

Respondents rated the availability of various types of gastronomic content in Split on a scale from 1 (not available at all) to 5 (excellent availability). The results show that **fish restaurants** are perceived as the most readily available option, with **51.67%** of participants giving the highest rating (mean score: **4.42**, SD = 0.67). In contrast, **vegetarian menus** were the least available, with **5%** of respondents indicating they were not available at all, and the lowest overall average score (**3.60**, SD = 1.14), alongside **healthy food bistros** (mean = **3.60**, SD = 1.04).

Table 2. Availability ratings of different elements of gastronomic tourism in Split.

Gastronomic Element	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Fish restaurants	4.42	0.67
Luxury restaurants	4.20	0.68
Authentic local cuisine	3.98	1.02
Street food	3.78	1.03
Exotic cuisine	3.68	0.99
Children's menu	3.67	0.96
Healthy food bistros	3.60	1.04
Vegetarian menu	3.60	1.14

Although **authentic local cuisine** also scored well (mean = 3.98), the findings suggest there is room for improvement in aligning the offer with emerging dietary preferences and global health trends. Overall satisfaction with the gastronomic availability was relatively high, with **66.67%** of respondents rating it as "good" and **20%** as "excellent", resulting in a mean score of **4.05** (SD = 0.62).

These results indicate a strong foundation in traditional offerings, particularly seafood, while highlighting a growing demand for more diverse, health-conscious, and vegetarian options.

4.4. Gastronomy as a Motivational Factor

Only one participant (1.7%) indicated gastronomy as their primary reason for

visiting Split. This underscores that, while appreciated, food is still considered supplementary. In contrast, destinations like San Sebastián or Lyon attract tourists specifically for culinary experiences [10].

4.5. Loyalty and Return Intentions

Despite 72% of respondents stating that gastronomy positively influenced their experience, only 30% mentioned food as a factor that would influence a return visit. This reveals a satisfaction-loyalty gap—a common challenge for destinations without a clearly defined gastronomic brand [11].

Table 3. Correlation and regression analysis—overall satisfaction and return intention.

Analysis Type	Variable 1	Variable 2	Coefficient	Significance (p-value)	R ²
Pearson Correlation	Overall Satisfaction	Return Intention	0.58	<0.01	–
Linear Regression	Independent: Overall Satisfaction	Dependent: Return Intention	$\beta = 0.41$	<0.05	0.24

Although overall satisfaction shows a statistically significant positive correlation with return intention ($r = 0.58$), the regression indicates that only 24% of the variance in return intention is explained by satisfaction levels ($R^2 = 0.24$) (See **Table 3**). This supports the presence of a satisfaction-loyalty gap, especially in contexts lacking a distinct gastronomic identity [11].

4.6. Identified Weaknesses and Opportunities

Some recurring critiques included:

- **Lack of creativity (M = 3.57):** Tourists noted that while traditional dishes were prevalent, innovation was lacking.
- **Value for money (M = 3.57):** Some tourists felt pricing did not align with food quality or portion sizes.
- **Infrastructure concerns (M = 2.88):** Difficulties with parking and access to some restaurants, especially in the Old Town, were mentioned.

4.7. Emerging Preferences and Sustainability

Several respondents expressed growing interest in:

- **Plant-based and vegetarian cuisine**
- **Sustainable practices (e.g., no plastic use, organic sourcing)**
- **Transparent sourcing and ethical dining**

This aligns with the global rise of “slow food” and ethical consumption movements [12]. Split restaurants could capture new market segments by promoting these attributes.

5. Conclusions

The study confirms that gastronomy enhances the overall tourist experience in

Split, contributing positively to satisfaction. However, its role remains secondary to traditional tourism motivators such as heritage, nature, and leisure. Although tourists rate the overall gastronomic offer favorably (average score 4.05), only a small percentage (1 out of 60) cited gastronomy as their primary reason for visiting, and just 30% indicated it would motivate a return visit. This indicates that while Split's gastronomic offer meets expectations, it has yet to become a standalone attraction capable of driving loyalty.

Tourists expressed high satisfaction with aspects like hygiene, staff language skills, and restaurant hours, but noted weak points such as a lack of parking, limited menu creativity, and poor value for money. The average satisfaction score for menu creativity and price-value balance (3.57) suggests room for innovation and better alignment with tourists' expectations. Furthermore, interest in vegetarian and health-oriented cuisine is growing, yet satisfaction with their availability remains modest (3.60), presenting a business opportunity for restaurateurs.

Importantly, satisfaction levels were not influenced by gender, age, income, or education, reinforcing that the perceived quality of the offer itself is the key driver of tourist satisfaction.

To better position Split as a culinary destination, the following steps are recommended:

- Innovate and diversify menu offerings while preserving traditional elements.
- Tell stories through food, incorporating local history and culture into dining experiences.
- Embrace global trends, especially sustainable and health-conscious options.
- Create integrated experiences, such as food tours, cooking workshops, or farmer's market visits.
- Improve accessibility, infrastructure, and training to elevate service quality.

Split holds significant potential to become a Mediterranean leader in gastronomic tourism, but this will require coordinated public and private investment, targeted marketing, and a clear gastronomic identity.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix A

Likert Scale Items Used in the Questionnaire

Q: Satisfaction with Elements of the Gastronomic Offer in Split

(Scale: 1—extremely dissatisfied, 2—dissatisfied, 3—neutral, 4—satisfied, 5—extremely satisfied)

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the following elements:

- 1) Variety of restaurants
- 2) Menu creativity
- 3) Quality of service
- 4) Staff behavior
- 5) Reservation procedure
- 6) Parking availability
- 7) Level of hygiene
- 8) Employee language skills
- 9) Interior design
- 10) Value for money
- 11) Atmosphere
- 12) Availability of food delivery
- 13) Restaurant working hours

Q: Availability of Specific Gastronomic Content in Split

(Scale: 1—content not available at all, 2—poor availability, 3—mediocre availability, 4—good availability, 5—excellent availability)

Respondents were asked to assess the availability of the following content:

- 1) Seafood restaurants
- 2) Authentic local cuisine
- 3) Luxury restaurants
- 4) Kids menu
- 5) Street food
- 6) Healthy food bistro
- 7) Exotic cuisine
- 8) Vegetarian menu

Overall Satisfaction

(Scale: 1—extremely dissatisfied, 2—dissatisfied, 3—neutral, 4—satisfied, 5—extremely satisfied)

- Overall, how satisfied are you with the gastronomic offer in Split?