

THE ROLE OF GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATION PRODUCTS IN BUILDING THE IDENTITY OF A GASTRONOMIC TOURISTIC DESTINATION IN ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

In an increasing competitive market, the identity of territorial products has become a key factor for sustainable development. Geographical Indications (GIs) are increasingly seen as strategic tools for rural development and the promotion of tourist destinations. Geographical Indications strengthen the connection between the product and its place of origin, giving the product an added symbolic and economic value. Despite the relevance of the tourism sector, there is a limited quantitative research that explores tourists geographical Indication Schemes affecting gastronomic tourism demand in Albania. The purpose of this study is to analyze in depth the impact that local foods and products certified with Geographical Indications (GIs) have on the development of gastronomic tourism, with a particular focus on Albania. As one of the countries with a rich culinary heritage, high biodiversity, and a strongly rural structure, Albania possesses exceptional potential for developing sustainable tourism models that are closely connected to territory, culture, and food experience. Geographical Indications (GIs) serve as a guarantee of quality, origin and tradition, as a way to help them differentiate from industrial products. In Albania, there is a legal framework for protecting GIs (Law No. 9977-2008 on Industrial Property) the awareness level among producers remains low. So far, Albania has registered a limited number of products as GIs, but assessments indicate that dozens of other products — including fruits, vegetables, livestock products, olive oil, wine, and honey — have potential and meet the criteria for certification (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2022). The research is quantitative and was conducted in Albania, a country that is rich in distinctive products that preserve cultural identity and connection with territory, offering strong foundations for enhancing culinary tourism and fostering economic development. The authors aim to identify the importance of local foods in the tourist experience, their exposure to and consumption of GI-certified products and their perceptions of the role of these products in understanding local culture. These findings offer a precise understanding of the impact of Geographical Indication Schemes in developing gastronomic tourism destinations and provide a strategic basis for designing policies aimed in maximizing the profits of local products.

Keywords: Geographical Indications, local food producers, local resources, tourism.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, tourism has transformed into an economic sector with broad impact, capable of stimulating sustainable development, preserving cultural heritage, and diversifying local economies, particularly in rural regions. Within this context, one of the most dynamic and growing forms of tourism is gastronomic tourism, which intertwines the tourist experience with the authentic elements of local food, culinary traditions, and the culture of eating within a community. (Gheorghe, G., Tudorache, P., & Nistoreanu, P. 2014). This type of tourism not only encourages the inclusion of local communities in the tourism sector but also creates new opportunities for promoting territorial identity and for the economic valorization of local products (Ivona, A. (2021). An essential element that has gained particular importance in the promotion and differentiation of food products in the international market, as well as in the development of gastronomic tourism, is the concept of Geographical Indications (GI). GIs represent designations directly linked to the geographical origin of a product, representing specific features that derive from location, traditional production techniques, and the historical experiences of the producing community (Giovannucci, D., et al 2009). According to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), a geographical indication is “a sign used to identify goods that originate from a specific territory, and whose qualities, reputation, or characteristics are essentially linked to that geographical place” (WIPO, 2020). In academic literature, Belletti and Marescotti (2011) emphasize that GIs are not merely commercial labels, but represent a complex system of cultural, social, and economic values rooted in specific territories. These indicators are connected with the use of traditional production techniques, with sensitivity to soil and climate quality (the *terroir*), as well as with the history and identity of local communities. The authenticity of a GI product is the result of a combination of natural and human factors, which creates a strong link between the place of origin and the final product (Barham, 2003). In the context of gastronomic tourism, GIs are increasingly seen as strategic tool for rural development and the promotion of tourist destinations. Sims (2009) argues that consumers and tourists are increasingly inclined to seek authentic experiences, which are connected to foods representing their place of origin and grounded in history and tradition. Through certification as GIs, agri-food products gain a special legal and commercial status, increasing their market value and guaranteeing consumers the authenticity and quality of origin Hajdukiewicz, A. (2023). The main objective of this paper is to analyze how local foods and Geographical Indication products influence the development of gastronomic tourism, focusing on the interactions between territory, culture, and tourist experience. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the paper aims to address the role of GIs as tools for building the identity of tourist destinations, for fostering rural development, and for promoting sustainable tourism. In the Albanian context, where tourism has been identified as a priority sector for development, the inclusion of local foods and GIs in the tourism offer presents an as-yet-untapped potential. So far, Albania has registered a limited number of products as GIs, but assessments indicate that dozens of other products — including fruits, vegetables, livestock products, olive oil, wine, and honey — have potential and meet the criteria for certification (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2022). Regions such as Shkodra, Dibra, Kukës, Tropoja, and Përmet are rich in distinctive products that preserve cultural identity and connection with territory, offering strong foundations for the development of sustainable gastronomic tourism. The current relevance of this topic also lies in its alignment with national strategies for tourism and rural development. The European Union, through its policies on quality schemes (PDO, PGI, and TSG), has enabled the preservation and promotion of more than 3,500 traditional products, integrating them into regional development, tourism, and territorial marketing policies (European Commission, 2020). This experience serves as a reference model for Albania, which, within the framework of the European integration process, must harmonize its legislation and practices with EU standards in the field of food quality and traditional product protection.

Literature Review

Geographical Indications as a Pillar of Gastronomic Tourism. In the context of sustainable tourism development and the promotion of cultural heritage, Geographical Indications (GIs) represent a key mechanism for strengthening the link between agri-food products and their place of origin. They are not merely a quality label for agricultural and food products, but also a powerful instrument for building territorial identity, fostering community pride, and promoting tourist destinations in an authentic and differentiated way. In the European Union, policies for the protection of products with Geographical Indication — such as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), and Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG) — have been established as strategic pillars for safeguarding food heritage and supporting rural development (European Commission, 2021). This approach has enabled tourists to connect not only emotionally but also culturally with the origin and heritage of

these products, creating authentic and memorable experiences (Olivieri & Giraldi, 2015). In this way, Geographical Indications have acquired a dual function: on the one hand, they fulfill the need to guarantee the quality and origin of products, while on the other hand, they serve as powerful tool for territorial promotion and tourism marketing. In an increasingly globalized market filled with standardized products, GIs offer a strong means of differentiation for tourist destinations, providing visitors with added value linked to authenticity, history, and the unique features of a specific place (Bessière, 1998; Belletti & Marescotti, 2011). Recent studies show that tourists are increasingly choosing their destinations based on the food experiences they offer. According to the World Food Travel Association, over 80% of international travelers are motivated partially or fully by local gastronomy, while for more than 25% of them, the food experience is the main factor in destination choice (WFTA, 2020). In this regard, GI products have the potential to contribute to increasing tourist flows, extending the tourist season, and diversifying the tourism offer of a region. Beyond the direct economic benefits for producers and local communities, GIs also contribute to the preservation of agri-food biodiversity, the protection of traditional production techniques, and the strengthening of social cohesion. Based on the values of tradition, sustainability, and respect for the environment, GI products create a natural synergy with the philosophy of sustainable tourism (Crescenzi et al., 2021). From a territorial perspective, Geographical Indications help build a consistent and credible narrative for the regions that produce them. They give voice to rural communities — often marginalized — by actively involving them in the tourism economy and providing them with opportunities for development based on their authentic and incomparable resources. The communities are often involved in the creation of “taste routes” or gastronomic itineraries that include visits to workshops, tastings, educational activities, and interactive experiences related to the production and consumption of local food (Caso & Giordano, 2022). Within this framework, many authors emphasize the importance of integrating quality schemes such as GIs into the strategies for gastronomic and rural tourism development. The integration of food as a central element of the tourist experience should not be a random or secondary activity but an integral part of destination strategic planning. This implies not only the promotion of products but also educating visitors about their origin and the values behind them, creating cross-sectoral synergies, and involving the local community in every step of the value chain (Hall & Mitchell, 2001; Királ'ová & Malec, 2021). *Geographical Indications (GIs)* represent one of the most advanced mechanisms for protecting the cultural, economic, and territorial assets of producing communities at the global level. Defined as designations identifying an agricultural or food product originating from a specific place and possessing qualities, reputation, or characteristics essentially attributable to its geographical origin, GIs have become the subject of a broad international legal framework that aims to regulate their recognition, protection, and use in the global market. In this context, four key pillars have played a fundamental role in building this framework: the TRIPS Agreement under the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Lisbon System for the international protection of appellations of origin, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), and the policies of the European Union (EU). The concept of gastronomic routes is closely tied to efforts to promote products with Geographical Indications (GIs), preserve agri-food biodiversity, and strengthen the territorial identity of rural regions. In Albania, this concept is increasingly evident through organized tours by agencies such as Albania Food Tours, which develop itineraries in Tirana that include visits to traditional markets and rakia tastings, or rural excursions featuring meetings with wine and olive oil producers in the villages surrounding Vlorë and Lezhë. There are also more extensive tours such as Best of Albania Food Tours, which last several days and combine southern coastal areas with tastings in remote mountain villages. These thematic routes in Albania establish a link between GI products (such as certified wines), local biodiversity, and territorial identity, allowing tourists to explore heritage through taste, vineyard visits, cooking workshops, and cultural events. In this context, Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) labels play a crucial role in legitimizing the products included in these itineraries by guaranteeing authenticity, quality, and traceability. Beyond ensuring consumer trust, these certifications also help build a territorial narrative that adds meaning to the tourism experience. From the consumer's perspective, gastronomic routes offer not only a unique experience but also an opportunity to engage in a more conscious and ethical form of consumption. Tourists are increasingly seeking authentic experiences connected to nature, food, and history, making gastronomic tourism a powerful tool for rural destination development.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Methodology and data analysis. This study is built upon a qualitative and comparative research approach that combines theoretical analysis with the collection of empirical data, with the aim of assessing the role of local foods

and products with Geographical Indication (GI) in the development of gastronomic tourism in Albania. In the first phase, an in-depth analysis of scientific literature and institutional sources was carried out, including international academic articles in the fields of sustainable tourism, gastronomy, and rural development. In parallel, official documents and legal practices prepared by institutions such as FAO, UNWTO, the European Commission, WIPO, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in Albania were examined. In Albania, the potential of these products to be strategically integrated into tourism development — and particularly into gastronomic tourism — has not yet been fully exploited. Although the country possesses a rich culinary heritage and an increasing number of products certified as GIs, the lack of an integrated approach between the agriculture and tourism sectors, infrastructural limitations, and insufficient consumer awareness have hindered the development of a functional and sustainable model. *The main research problem of this study lies in the question: Do local foods and products registered with geographical indications influence the development of gastronomic tourism in Albania? Within this framework, the following research questions arise: What is the role of products with Geographical Indication in building the identity of gastronomic tourist destinations?*

RESULTS

Research findings. As part of this study, an empirical research instrument in the form of a structured questionnaire was conducted with a sample of 115 tourists, both domestic and international, who visited Albania during the research period (February – June 2025). The main purpose of this questionnaire was to assess the perceptions, experiences, and behaviors of tourists regarding the role of local foods and products certified with Geographical Indications (GIs) in shaping their experience of the Albanian tourist destination. The selection of this instrument aimed to collect direct data from the consumers of the tourism experience themselves, thus providing valuable insights into how gastronomy and products with protected identity influence, directly or indirectly, tourist satisfaction, engagement, and post-visit behavior. *The questionnaire included a series of closed-ended questions addressing key aspects such as: the importance of local foods in their tourist experience; exposure to and consumption of GI-certified products; perceptions of the role of these products in understanding local culture; evaluation of the quality of promotion and its influence on future travel or destination recommendation decisions; and interest in structured gastronomic itineraries.* The analysis of responses helps construct a clear narrative about the potential of GI products to become powerful tools for destination differentiation, authentic identity building, and the sustainable development of gastronomic tourism in Albania.

The Importance of Local Foods in the Tourist Experience. The results of the questionnaire show that an overwhelming majority of respondents (69.6%) consider local food to be “*very important*” in their tourist experience, while 22.6% rated it as “*important*.” Only a small percentage (6%) perceive it as “*slightly important*,” and 1.7% as “*not important at all*.” These findings clearly demonstrate that gastronomy is not a secondary component but rather a central element of the tourist experience, closely linked to the demand for authenticity and cultural immersion. They align with the views of scholars such as Sims (2009), who argues that local food provides a “*window*” into the culture of a destination, making it more tangible and distinctive in the eyes of visitors.

Experience with Local Products. A significant percentage of respondents (76.5%) reported having consumed local products promoted as part of Albania’s cultural heritage. Conversely, 16.5% had not tried any such products, while 7% were uncertain about whether they had been part of such an experience. These data suggest that a considerable portion of tourists is exposed to local offerings, indicating a visible presence of traditional products in itineraries or consumption venues. However, the relatively high percentage of those who have not consumed or are uncertain about such experiences raises questions about the effectiveness of communication and recognizability of these products during visits.

Evaluation of the Promotion of Geographical Indication Products. The data from the survey reveal a diverse assessment by tourists regarding the quality and visibility of the promotion of Geographical Indication (GI) products in Albania. Specifically, 46.1% of respondents rated the promotion as “*adequate*”, 24.3% as “*poor*”, while only 23.5% considered it “*very good*”. Additionally, 6.1% stated that they had not noticed any form of promotion at all. These results raise a clear concern regarding the absence of a unified and effective communication strategy that would ensure GI products are visible, recognizable, and understandable to tourists. Furthermore, the discrepancy between tourists’ positive perception of local products and their limited recognition on-site indicates a communication gap that, if properly addressed, could significantly enhance the impact of these products on visitor experience and the development of gastronomic tourism.

Awareness and Consumption of Geographical Indication Products. Approximately 70.4% of respondents stated

that they had heard of or consumed products with Geographical Indication during their stay in Albania, while 29.6% reported no such experience. This finding is essentially positive and encouraging, as it signals a considerable presence of GI products in the Albanian tourism market, suggesting that a large share of visitors are exposed to these products—either through traditional restaurants, agritourism activities, or specialized shops. However, the relatively high percentage of those who had not encountered or were unaware of GI products indicates that culturally protected products are still not systematically integrated into the tourist experience. This gap can be attributed to the lack of structured information, clear labeling, or missing connections between tourist itineraries and certified local producers.

Impact of Geographical Indication Products on the Tourist Experience. Among the tourists who consumed products certified with Geographical Indications during their stay in Albania, 59.3% reported a “*very positive*” impact on their overall tourist experience, while 35.8% rated it as “*positive*.” Only a small percentage (4.9%) perceived this impact as “*neutral*”, and none of the respondents reported a negative impact. These data indicate that GI products play an important role in enhancing the quality and depth of the tourist experience, making visits more authentic, engaging, and meaningful. The use of foods with protected identity represents not only a culinary pleasure but also a channel for interaction with the territory, culture, and local traditions—strengthening the visitor’s sense of connection to the destination. This result aligns with existing literature, which argues that local gastronomy—especially when linked to certified identities such as GIs—helps create immersive and transformative experiences for visitors (Bessière, 1998; Everett & Aitchison, 2008). In this context, GI products should not be regarded merely as consumer goods but as components of added tourism value, capable of playing a strategic role in shaping differentiated and sustainable experiences within rural and gastronomic destinations.

Interest in Gastronomic Itineraries Based on GI Products. The results of the questionnaire indicate a high level of interest among tourists in participating in travel itineraries centered on local products with Geographical Indications (GIs): 60.9% of respondents clearly expressed a desire to follow such itineraries, 31.3% responded “*maybe*,” while only a small proportion (7.8%) declared no interest. This strong inclination toward participatory experiences demonstrates that tourists are increasingly seeking authentic and structured activities that combine gastronomy with territorial exploration. Products such as Chestnut Honey from Reç, Zalli i Bardhë Cheese, or Borsh Olive Oil can serve as anchor points for the creation of thematic routes, offering visitors the opportunity to discover not only taste but also the history, culture, and landscape surrounding each product.

CONCLUSION

Although Albania is still in the early stages of fully implementing the European Geographical Indications (GI) schemes, it increasingly views local gastronomy as a key asset for developing tourism and strengthening rural economies. The country possesses a wealth of culinary traditions — from indigenous wines to agricultural products such as olives, fruits, and traditional recipes — which could greatly benefit from geographical indication protection. Since 2019, national strategies and government policies have incorporated GIs as both marketing and development tools: “*The measures of the Albanian government aim to promote unique regional products, thereby contributing to the growth of local economies and tourism.*” This approach is aligned with EU practices, as Albania prepares for integration and the full adoption of the PDO/PGI legal framework.

The growing list of Albanian products registered as GIs and TSGs represents a national asset that must be preserved, promoted, and actively integrated into rural development and gastronomic tourism policies. The food routes function not merely as tourist itineraries but as a model of sustainable development for local communities. They contribute to the geographic dispersal of visitors, the extension of the tourist season, and the creation of new jobs—particularly for women and youth in rural areas. Moreover, they generate opportunities for developing short supply chains and promoting circular economy initiatives. This evolution not only safeguards the agri-cultural identity of the country but also contributes to building a stronger and more self-sustaining rural economy. The promotion of local gastronomy is an essential strategy for destinations aiming to build a distinctive and sustainable tourism identity. Emphasizing labeling, educational promotion, and the involvement of tourism operators in raising awareness of local GI products is essential to maximize their impact on the tourist experience. Even though awareness exists, it is not always conscious or deliberate—reducing the actual impact of GIs on destination identity building. Enhancing access to information and actively integrating these products into tour offers, gastronomic menus, and tourist experiences could significantly improve this aspect. It is worth emphasizing that every product registered as a GI in

Albania carries multiple values — economic, cultural, environmental, and touristic. Their registration has enabled participation in national and international fairs, inclusion in gastronomic itineraries, and the development of a sustainable regional image. Moreover, they inspire the establishment of new businesses, improvement of production standards, and raise awareness about Albania's culinary heritage. Future research should consider the local businesses attitude toward the implementation of Geographical Indication Schemes to build broader evidence based.

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Conflicts of interest. The authors have no conflicts of interests.

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