

## GASTRONOMIC TOURISM IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA - TRENDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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### Abstract

*In recent years, gastronomic tourism in the Republic of Moldova has gained momentum due to the country's rich culinary heritage and traditional dishes. The culinary culture of the Republic of Moldova is shaped by its history and geography, with influences from neighbouring countries Romania and Ukraine, as well as its history of being a part of the USSR. The Moldovan wine industry has also played a significant role in driving food tourism, with a long history of winemaking and numerous vineyards and wineries. Moreover, there is growing interest in agri-tourism, which offers visitors the chance to experience rural life and learn about traditional farming practices. Many small family farms in Moldova provide accommodations and activities such as cooking classes, farming activities, and vineyard visits. Despite the potential for food tourism, Moldova's food tourism industry has yet to reach its full potential. To attract more food tourists, promoting and marketing the country's culinary heritage and traditional dishes, as well as increasing the number of food-related events and activities, could prove beneficial. Gastronomy is an integral part of every community, representing a valuable tourism resource and an essential tool for destination image and branding. This paper aims to analyze the potential of Moldova's food tourism industry and provide recommendations for establishing and developing it further as an important pillar of the country's tourism industry. Moldova's ethnic and social diversity and indigenous communities influence its gastronomy, providing insights into ancient gastronomic traditions, customs, manners, and farming practices, making Moldova a unique and underdeveloped gastronomic tourism destination. Materials and methods: The authors apply a quantitative research approach, analyzing data from the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova to examine trends and opportunities in the country's gastronomic tourism. Various research methods, including analysis, comparison, grouping, and SWOT analysis, were employed. Main results: The findings reveal that Moldova's tourism industry was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 but showed signs of recovery in 2021. The country's rural areas, wine industry, and culinary traditions offer unique opportunities for gastronomic tourism development. However, challenges such as lack of awareness, promotion, limited infrastructure, and low stakeholder collaboration need to be addressed. Conclusions: This study highlights Moldova's potential for gastronomic tourism development. To fully develop this industry, efforts should focus on promoting the country's culinary heritage, increasing food-related events and activities, improving infrastructure and services, fostering collaborations, and leveraging digital platforms. By addressing challenges and capitalizing on opportunities, Moldova can establish and further develop its food tourism industry, contributing to economic growth, job creation, and the promotion of its unique culinary heritage.*

**Key words:** gastronomic tourism, culinary heritage, niche tourism, agri-tourism, Republic of Moldova

### INTRODUCTION

This article centres on the Republic of Moldova, a country where food consumption holds a significant role in society, yet the food tourism industry is relatively underdeveloped. The Moldavian culture and heritage place special emphasis on food and beverage attributes, reflecting the diversity of culinary traditions, local ingredients, and cooking techniques. Despite its rich gastronomic

heritage, Moldova has yet to fully realize the potential of its food tourism industry. This article aims to explore the trends and opportunities of gastronomic tourism in Moldova and provide recommendations on how the industry can be established and further developed as a vital component of the country's tourism sector. By promoting the country's culinary heritage and traditional dishes and expanding the number of food-related activities and events, Moldova can

attract more food tourists and contribute to the economic growth of the tourism industry.

In addition to the importance of gastronomic tourism itself, it is essential to consider the future of food in the context of responsible production, acquisition, consumption, and disposition [22]. The sustainable development of gastronomic tourism in the Republic of Moldova requires addressing these aspects and integrating them into the industry's development strategies and practices. By promoting a sustainable and responsible food system, gastronomic tourism can contribute not only to economic growth but also to the protection of the environment and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle for tourists and locals alike.

Gastronomic tourism has gained popularity in recent years, as food has become an integral part of travel experiences. In the Republic of Moldova, gastronomy plays a significant role in the country's cultural identity, as its culinary heritage is heavily influenced by its history and geography. With influences from Romania, Ukraine, Bulgaria and Russia, Moldovan cuisine is a unique blend of flavours and traditions.

Despite its rich culinary heritage and potential, the food tourism industry in Moldova is still relatively underdeveloped compared to other countries in the region. Limited awareness and promotion of Moldovan cuisine, as well as the need for more developed infrastructure and services for food tourism, pose challenges for the industry. Through a review of the literature, the article will identify the main challenges and opportunities facing the food tourism industry in Moldova, and provide insights into the potential for growth and development. The authors will also describe their own research methods and provide an analysis of their findings, highlighting the unique contribution of their work to the existing body of knowledge in the field.

Levi-Strauss C. in 1966 (Clark, D., 2004) [1] and Douglas M. in 1972 (Dusselier, J, 2009) [5] are among the early theorists who argued that food is a crucial element in cultural identity and social behavior. They suggested that food reflects social structure, value

systems, and even religious beliefs. In tourism development, food and gastronomy play a critical role in both social-cultural and economic dimensions. Gastronomy has been utilized as an important economic segment for local and regional development, with its potential for employment creation, entrepreneurship, and community development. Furthermore, gastronomy has been identified as a marketing tool for enhancing destination competitiveness (McKercher et al., 2008) [13], contributing to the image building of the destination and increasing its visibility to tourists. Alongside economic dimensions, food and gastronomy are significant markers of cultural identity, as they reflect the diversity of culinary traditions, local ingredients, and cooking techniques, which can distinguish one destination from another. Gastronomy has become an increasingly important motivation for choosing a destination, offering a growing potential to stimulate local economies (Min-Pei, L, et al., 2018) [14].

Gastronomy is a window into a country's past and present, providing insights into farming practices, ancient gastronomic traditions, customs, and manners. This paper aims to explore the potential of gastronomic tourism in Moldova and provide recommendations on how to establish and further develop it as a crucial pillar of the country's tourism industry. By leveraging the unique cultural and culinary heritage of Moldova, food tourism can contribute to economic growth and community development (Gajic, 2015) [8]. This paper will analyse the current state of the food tourism industry in Moldova and identify areas for improvement. It will also provide recommendations for promoting the country's culinary heritage, developing food-related activities and events, and improving infrastructure to attract more food tourists. Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to position Moldova as a competitive gastronomic tourism destination and contribute to the growth and success of the tourism industry in the country.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has reported that food accounts for a significant percentage of

tourist expenditure (30-40%), underlining the importance of food from an economic and marketing perspective (UNWTO, 2012),(UNWTO, 2017) [30, 31]. Academic literature on food tourism has seen considerable growth in both volume and range, with conventional approaches primarily focusing on the importance of food tourism as a key economic component and on aspects such as tourist motivation and behavior, marketing and competitiveness, innovation and creativity, as well as destination image and branding (Tikkanen, 2007; Du Rand and Heath, 2006; Sidali et al., 2015) [26, 4, 21]. Nevertheless, there is an increasing cross-disciplinary interest in food tourism as a specialized form of tourism that offers more genuine, culturally rich, and immersive experiences (Stone, M., J et al., 2020) [24]. Therefore, food tourism is a holistic experience that offers more than just sustenance and basic needs for food and drinks, and can contribute to the development and promotion of a destination.

The popularity of gastronomic tourism has grown in recent years, generating billions in revenue for businesses worldwide. This type of tourism not only motivates travel but also enriches it with authentic and memorable experiences. Such trips allow tourists to learn about regional traditions and customs, and the stories behind local products and dishes, well known wines, making gastronomic tourism a part of cultural tourism [10].

The potential of gastronomic tourism in Moldova has yet to be fully realized. While there has been some interest from foreign tourists and local travellers, the Covid-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the tourism industry as a whole. Despite this, the hospitality industry in Moldova has started to utilize gastronomic tourism as a means of attracting visitors. As the country's culinary heritage is an integral part of its culture and history, promoting and developing gastronomic tourism can contribute to economic growth and community development. However, it will require strategic planning, investment in infrastructure, and the collaboration of various

stakeholders to establish Moldova as a competitive gastronomic tourism destination.

The tourism industry is expanding its accessibility to various user groups, including the elderly, families with children, individuals or small groups, people with special needs, and those travelling with animals. The global Covid-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on the tourism industry, resulting in a 74 percent decrease in tourist arrivals in 2020 compared to 2019. Although the desire to travel was limited, many residents chose to engage in local tourism or travelled to neighbouring countries. With the threat of Covid-19 subsiding, it is crucial to assess the new circumstances and consider the changing motivations and habits of tourists. As Gursoy and Chi (2021) [9] indicated, identifying what will attract customers to return is critical and requires extensive research efforts.

In today's globalized world, many countries' tourism offerings are becoming increasingly homogenized, leading to a search for more unique and diverse types of tourism. One potential avenue for development is gastronomic tourism, which has become a market segment and an essential component for differentiating tourism destinations and making them attractive (World Tourism Organization and Basque Culinary Center, 2021) [33]. The food of a particular country or region can be a significant resource for its tourism industry, as tourists are willing to devote significant time and income to quality and exciting food experiences. Additionally, sharing a meal or drink provides a context for socialization and connection with family, friends, and local communities, making gastronomic tourism an inclusive activity (Fountain, 2022) [6].

Nistoreanu, Nicodim, and Diaconescu (2018) [20] suggest that the gastronomic experience can encompass a wide range of activities, including attending cooking schools and cookware stores, collecting cookbooks, participating in gastronomic tours, consulting guides and menus, and visiting wine cellars, distilleries, and food producers. However, it is essential to recognize that these activities should not be seen merely as opportunities for tourists to spend money, but rather as chances

to immerse themselves in the culture of the country or region and enjoy a memorable holiday with friends, family, or colleagues.

The concept of gastronomic tourism is still in its early stages in Moldova's tourism and hospitality industry.

Moldova is known for its unique culinary heritage, featuring natural and locally sourced ingredients, traditional cooking techniques, and a visually appealing presentation of dishes.

Gastronomic festivals and events are among the most popular attractions for gastronomic tourists in Moldova. These events take place throughout the year, in various Moldovan cities and towns, showcasing the country's diverse cuisine and culinary traditions. Moldova's gastronomic tourism industry is growing and offers a range of experiences that are comparable to those available globally. When travelling around Moldova, visitors can enjoy both traditional and modern cuisine at restaurants, visit local farmers, participate in gastronomic festivals, tastings, and educational events (Moldova Travel, 2023) [17]. Various organizations in Moldova are making significant efforts to attract foreign tourists to the country, as well as encouraging local residents to explore different parts of Moldova.

Gastronomic tourism is a unique trend in the tourism industry that is gaining popularity each year. It offers more than just the opportunity to taste new dishes. It is incorrect to compare gastronomic tourism with classic sightseeing tourism as the former requires special organization that involves the careful selection of interesting places to visit and unique products that best showcase the state or regional authenticity. The main feature of gastronomic tours is the opportunity to taste unique dishes that are not easily found elsewhere. Cultural traditions and resources, as well as natural and climatic characteristics, shape the cultural life of a region. The level of harmony between natural and climatic conditions determines the attractiveness of the gastronomic culture in a regional context.

Gastronomic tourism has become a significant driver of the tourism industry worldwide, as travellers increasingly seek unique and

authentic culinary experiences in different destinations. The Republic of Moldova, a small country located in south-eastern Europe, is not an exception to this trend. With a rich culinary heritage and a growing tourism industry, the country has the potential to become a gastronomic tourism destination.

By providing insights and recommendations for the development of this industry, this research can help guide policymakers, tourism businesses, and other stakeholders towards sustainable and responsible tourism practices, while also showcasing the rich culinary traditions and cultural heritage of Moldova to a wider audience.

In this context, the purpose of the paper is to analyze the trends and opportunities of gastronomic tourism in the Republic of Moldova and to provide strategic recommendations for the sustainable development of this industry.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The authors of this article used a quantitative research approach and analyzed data from the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova to examine the trends and opportunities of gastronomic tourism in the country.

The data analyzed included the number of tourists who visited Moldova between 2019 and 2021, specifically focusing on the types of accommodations they stayed in and their countries of origin, including the European Union, non-EU countries, neighbouring countries such as Romania and Ukraine, Muslim countries, and other countries. In addition to quantitative analysis, the authors used research methods such as analysis, comparison, grouping, and SWOT analysis in developing the paper.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Gastronomic tourism has become a significant driver of the tourism industry worldwide, as travellers increasingly seek unique and authentic culinary experiences in different destinations. The Republic of Moldova, a small country located in South-Eastern

Europe, nestled in the North- East of the Balkans, spans an area of 33,843.5 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of around 2.8 million people, according to the 2014 census (Duca Gh. et. al., 2009) [3]. This country is no exception to the trend mentioned.

We mention that in 2014, the census was conducted within the recognized borders, excluding the population of the districts on the left bank of the Dniester River and the city of Bender.

The Republic of Moldova, with its rich cultural heritage and culinary traditions, has the potential to become a major gastronomic tourism destination in the region. However, despite its potential, the industry remains underdeveloped and has not been studied comprehensively [2].

We would like to mention a specific characteristic of the country. According to the 2014 census (The Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Moldova, 2002-2022) [23], the ethnic structure of Republic of Moldova is as follows: Moldovans - 75.1%, Ukrainians - 7.2%, Russians - 6.6%, Gagauz - 4.6%, Romanians - 2.5%, Bulgarians - 1.9%, other ethnic groups - 2.1%.

Throughout its history, Moldova has been influenced by various cultures and civilizations, including Turks, Tatars, Poles, Austrians, Russians, and Romanians. This cultural and ethnic diversity has significantly influenced the gastronomic culture, cuisine, traditions, and customs of the Republic of Moldova.

From an economic perspective, the Republic of Moldova is an agro-industrial country, specialized in viticulture, fruit growing, vegetable growing, and other agricultural crops.

Rural tourism, ecotourism, and other related activities are recognized as valuable tools for economic development, poverty reduction, and sustainable development. In this paper, we argue that food tourism can also contribute to poverty reduction and provide a sustainable approach to tourism development and management in Moldova.

The traditional Moldavian cuisine is a combination of old traditions, seasonal

practices, culinary techniques, and ancestral community customs.

The rich history, culture and heritage of Republic of Moldova and particularly the various influences from foreign settlers, the hospitality of the Moldavian community as well as the authentic and unspoilt environment are key factors that underline the potential development of food tourism. Food experiences can provide a platform for further development of cultural activities and ones that tell the story of a destination, region and community. Second, a more explicit focus should be put on food tourism as an authentic, memorable and participatory experience. In this context, food should not be solely understood as a tangible product to be manufactured and sold as a tourism commodity. Instead, the focus should be on the production of food, for example, culinary traditions, authentic recipes, distinctive flavours, etc. Each region in Republic of Moldova is culturally rich and promoting food experiences that seek to unfold history, culture and heritage could greatly enhance the development of tourist activities.

In the process of examining the global map of gastronomic tourism, it is possible to conclude that there are regional administrative units that are searching for culinary products that can provide a certain uniqueness to each specific region.

In specific regions of the Republic of Moldova, the culinary traditions of diverse ethnic minorities are predominant. Consequently, there is a discernible trend toward establishing regional gastronomic hubs, even in less developed destinations, in order to draw in tourists. These efforts often lead to the creation of a territorial identity, particularly in the gastronomic realm, which is composed of specific elements (Figure 1). Ukrainians in the east consume "borsh", Bulgarians in the south serve traditional "mangea" (sauce with chicken), and the Gagauz prepare "shorpa", a highly seasoned mutton soup. Russian communities enjoy "pelmeni" - meat-filled dumplings - and a variant of Ukrainian "varenyky" called "coltunasi", which are dumplings filled with

fresh cheese, meat, or cherries, is also popular. (Moldova to visit.eu, 2023) [16].

Table 1. Tourist zones of the Republic of Moldova from the perspective of administrative development regions

No.	Zone name	Locations and the most representative attractions in the zone [17]
1.	Central Region [17], [27]	Chişinău city (ex. Bernardazzi architecture); "Artă Rustică" crafts complex; "Plaiul Fagului" nature reserve; Manuc Bey Palace; "Orheiul Vechi" cultural-natural reserve [27], Mimi Castle
2.	Northern Region	Suta de Movile - Meeting with our Getae ancestors; Bălţi city - Capital of the North; Barza Albă Divin - Tasting strong spirits; "Țaul" Park; Emil Racoviță Cave (Criva); Jewish Cemetery in Vadul Raşcov; Soroca Fort
3.	Southern Region	Beleu Lake; Bread Museum; Old Church of the Shroud of Mother of God; Golden Hills in Văleni village; Petru Rareş Road in Văleni village
4.	Gagauzia UTA Region [7]	"Gagauz Sofrası" ethno-tourism complex; P. Petkovich Ethno-Estate; At-Prolin horse farm located in Ceadir-Lunga city; 19th-century windmill; Saint Iveron Monastery; "Zidul Troian" historical monument
5.	Transnistrian Region	Tighina Fortress; Noul Neamţ Monastery; Karaman House (Karaman House preserves the authentic construction style of a house from 100 years ago)

Source: developed by the authors based on [17, 27, 7].

There are many interesting dishes of Moldovan origin in the region. It is worth starting with the "plăcintă" - pies with different fillings. Another iconic dish is corn "mămăliga" with stew. It is usually served with cheese. Popular dishes of Moldovan cuisine include "mici" (juicy beef sausages with spices and garlic), green tomato jam, "zama" (Moldovan soup served with raw egg and sour cream), chickpeas with pork, rice with sauerkraut and chicken, fried pork, (previously soaked in wine) with sauce (Moldovan broth sauce, garlic, and salt) and many other grilled meat dishes. The Moldovan government had good intentions when declaring wine as a food product in 2017 (MOLDPRES News Agency- Wine declared food product in Moldova, 2017 [18]. This seems to be a nice promotion strategy of gastronomic tourism in the Republic of Moldova.

The effect of developing gastronomic tourism on economic and social aspects is of decisive importance. It promotes recreational attractiveness at the regional level, allows the development of a modern infrastructure system in the tourism and cultural field, and serves as a basis for attracting highly qualified specialists to the region. An inherent characteristic of gastronomic tourism is a high degree of differentiation. Residents of each region, even within the same country, seek to

add uniqueness to their culinary traditions. Therefore, it is possible to talk about the possibility of developing this type of tourism primarily at the regional level.

Thirdly, a new approach is needed to market and develop food-related activities as intangible heritage. While the Republic of Moldova has four traditions and customs listed in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, 2023) [29].

there is no inscription related to culinary tradition. However, Chişinău (the capital of the Republic of Moldova) is part of the UNESCO Network of Learning Cities (since 2020), and within this network, gastronomy/food/cuisine is considered an essential reference for creativity and innovation [28].

The variety and diversity of cooking traditions in the regions of the country represent an untapped distinctive advantage for the development of cultural and heritage tourism.

A review of specialized literature on the subject in renowned international databases, Scopus and Web of Science, reveals no research specifically mentioning "gastronomic tourism in the Republic of Moldova" from 2010 to 2023.

All elements, mentioned in Fig.1, contribute to defining the gastronomic identity and creating a complex mosaic of tastes, flavors,

and culinary experiences specific to each region or culture.

Gastronomic tourism includes unique experiences and activities related to food and drinks. This form of tourism has arisen due to globalization's growing fascination with cuisine and the diverse approaches to dining that tourists adopt while on their travels. One of the most popular gastronomic tourism activities is visiting local catering places, local markets, gastro festivals, cooking classes, food fairs and exhibitions, eating at local restaurants, eating with locals' residents, street food tasting, gastronomic tours. Tasting local gastronomy products is a trend of modern tourism, for thousands consumer-

friendly way of spending leisure time and one of the main motives of many tourists.

Tourists are seeking to explore the entire process of regional food production, including growth, harvesting, transportation, and processing. They aim to taste local homemade dishes while engaging with the local residents for an authentic experience. Furthermore, they are interested in consuming dishes made from locally sourced organic ingredients.

The Republic of Moldova has the potential to become a successful destination for gastronomic tourism on a continental scale, given the volume and variety of resources available.

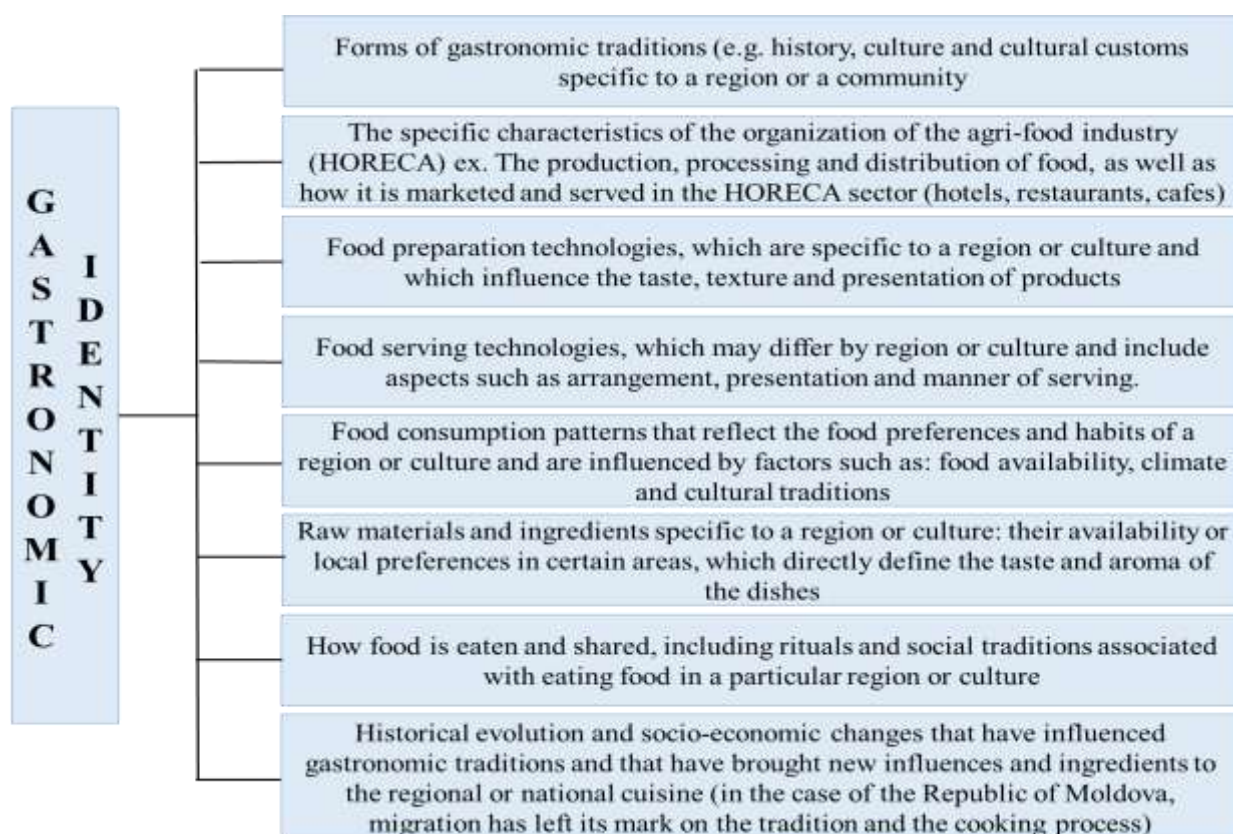


Fig. 1. Defining elements of the gastro-touristic identity of a region  
 Source: developed by the authors.

To achieve this, decision-making efforts should not only be focused at the national level, but also at the local level. It is worth noting that tourists make a variety of decisions before, during, and after their trips, which can greatly impact the success of gastronomic tourism in the country (Sugimoto & Nagai, 2020) [25],

Taking into account the experience of foreign countries that have achieved positive results in improving gastronomic tourism, it is necessary to emphasize the priority of state participation in the development of primary material and economic infrastructure.

An extremely important basis for improving the tourism industry is concrete measures taken at the state level.

Additionally, the state regulates the competitive parameters of existing tourism products and undertakes various actions to attract certain resources for their promotion

and development. State support measures are extremely important.

The share of tourism industry in Moldova's GDP, average for 2016-2018, was 0.6%, it is expected, in line with the Strategy, to reach 0.8% (average for 2023-2025) and 1% (average for 2026-2030)(Law No 315/2022).

Table 2. SWOT Analysis of the potential for developing gastronomic tourism in the Republic of Moldova

<p><b>Strengths:</b>                  Rich culinary heritage and traditional dishes that are unique to the country.                  High-quality wine industry with a long history of winemaking. Emerging trend in agri-tourism, which offers tourists the opportunity to experience rural life and traditional farming methods.                  Increasing acknowledgment of the country's gastronomic possibilities, both on a domestic and global scale.</p>	<p><b>Weaknesses:</b>                  Limited infrastructure for food-related activities and events, which makes it challenging to promote and market its culinary heritage.                  The lack of awareness and promotion of the country's traditional dishes and culinary customs.                  Insufficient collaboration and coordination between stakeholders in the tourism and agriculture sectors.                  Insufficient support from the state.                  Poorly developed road infrastructure.</p>
<p><b>Opportunities:</b>                  Development of food trails that showcase the diversity of Moldova's food culture and encourage tourists to explore different regions of the country.                  Promotion and marketing of traditional dishes and culinary heritage through social media and other marketing channels.                  Development of food-related activities and events, such as cooking classes, wine tastings, and farm tours.                  Growth of agri-tourism, which can provide tourists with a unique and authentic experience of rural life and traditional farming methods.</p>	<p><b>Threats:</b>                  Competition from other gastronomic destinations in the region, such as Romania and Ukraine.                  Economic instability and political uncertainty, which can discourage investment in the tourism industry.                  Seasonal fluctuations in tourism demand, which can make it difficult to maintain a consistent level of business throughout the year.                  The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the global tourism industry.                  The war in the neighbouring country and related risks (often restricted airspace, wave of refugees, etc.)</p>

Source: developed by the authors.

The National Development Strategy "Moldova Europe 2030", approved by law no. 315/2022 [11], has the following objectives:

- Development and diversification of the national tourism product, consolidation of the role of local communities and involvement of the diaspora.
- Consolidation of investments in the development of tourism infrastructure.
- Digitalization of tourism offers and products.
- Development of the workforce and educational programs.
- Formation and consolidation of tourist destinations, including through actions to promote, conserve, and restore historical monuments.
- Consolidation of the country's tourism brand and continued promotion activities in target markets.

This quote is from a report on "National Study on Moldovans' Perceptions of Local Tourism"

presented by the Investment Agency in 2020, and it is reflected in the National Development Strategy "European Moldova 2030". The report mentions that "people's declared preferences are towards family, cultural, nature, and historical tourism"(Law No 315/2022) [11].

Although the tourism industry in the Republic of Moldova has been expanding, with a rise in international tourist arrivals in recent years, the contribution of gastronomic tourism to the overall tourism industry remains relatively minor. The development of gastronomic tourism in the country is hindered by several challenges, including the lack of awareness and promotion of the country's culinary heritage, the limited infrastructure and facilities for food tourism, and the low level of collaboration among stakeholders.

According to the data of the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, the



flow of foreign tourists to Moldova before the pandemic in 2019 was continuously increasing, but also locals travelled within the country (Table 3).

The highest number of arrivals, in 2021, were tourists from neighbouring countries (Romania - 8,421 visitors, Ukraine - 2,735 - visitors) but also countries such as: Poland (4,147 visitors), Russian Federation (3,711 visitors), Italy (2,430 visitors) etc. However, with the influence of the global pandemic, the situation in the tourism industry has changed significantly. Already at the end of 2019, flights were stopped in many countries, which led to a decrease in the number of travellers and a deterioration in the performance of

hospitality companies. The travel restrictions imposed to stop the spread of the virus have had a devastating effect on the entire tourism industry around the world, without "sparing" the Republic of Moldova.

In a very short time, this COVID-19 pandemic has left its mark on people's lifestyles: many countries have been shut down, leading to the closure of restaurants, shopping places, public events and tourism in general. One of the most effective ways to avoid the virus was to stay at home, without physical contact, which resulted in a negative influence on an individual's mental health (WHO, 2020) [12, 32].

Table 3. The number of tourists staying in touristic reception structures in the years 2019-2021, thousands of people

Type of tourists	Arrivals			Percentage change of tourists arrivals, % (+/-)		
	2019	2020	2021	19/20	19/21	20/21
Local tourists (domestic)	200.7	61.6	109.3	-69.3	-45.5	+77.5
Foreign tourists	174.0	28.7	68.8	-83.5	-60.4	+139.6
Tourists from neighbouring countries (Ukraine, Romania)	174.0	28.7	68.9	-81.2	60.4	+110.7
Tourists from European Union countries	97.2	15.7	34.8	-83.8	-64.2	+121.3
Tourists from Muslim countries	8.0	1.8	3.4	-77.8	-58.1	+89.0

Source: Authors calculations based on data from National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova [19].

Note: Tourists from Muslim countries may have specific dietary requirements that need to be taken into account when developing food-related activities in Moldova. This includes the need for halal food options, which are foods that are prepared in accordance with Islamic dietary laws.

Based on Table 3, we found that in 2021, compared to 2020, the number of domestic trips (by Moldovan citizens) increased significantly marking an increase of about 77.5% compared to 2020 (Table 3). Meanwhile, the number of tourists from neighbouring countries - such as: Romania (EU country) and Ukraine (non-EU country) increased by about 110.7%, tourists from EU countries had an increase of 121.3%, tourists from Muslim countries (from: Turkey, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan) had an increase of 89%. A significant increase of 173.3% was tourism from other countries, tourists from the Russian Federation dominate with the highest share, followed by Israel, USA, Canada, Belarus, Switzerland, etc. In 2021 compared to 2019 visitors from China, Georgia, Norway and Japan - were less attracted to the Republic of Moldova.

Neighboring countries, particularly Ukraine and Romania, constitute a significant proportion of tourists visiting the Republic of Moldova. These tourists are drawn by the shared history and culture of the region, as well as the traditional Moldovan gastronomy and wines. Additionally, accessibility and geographic proximity make cross-border tourism convenient, creating opportunities for the Republic of Moldova and neighboring countries to develop joint tourism packages.

In 2021, establishments offering collective tourist accommodations experienced an increase in visitors, with 178.2 thousand tourists, which is twice as many as the previous year. This surge in visitors follows a decline of about 284.4 thousand tourists (4.1 times) in 2020 compared to 2019. Out of the total number of tourists, 109.3 thousand (61.4%) were residents, and 68.9 thousand (38.6%) were non-residents. The majority of

overnight tourists preferred to stay in tourist accommodation establishments in mun. Chisinau, accounting for 59.1% of the total, followed by the development regions of Centre - 23.9%, South - 8.2%, North - 7.3%, and UTA Gagauzia - 1.5% [15].

In 2021 travel agencies and tour operators provided tourist services to 320.9 thousand tourists and excursionists or 2.6 times more than in 2020.

The increase in the number of tourists and excursionists is due to the increase in the number of outbound tourists by 143.0

thousand persons (2.9 times), domestic tourism - by 36.3 thousand persons (by 1.8 times) and inbound tourism - by 17.1 thousand persons (3.5 times) (Moldova in figures, Statistics in brief, 2022) [15].

Table 4 shows the number of tourists accommodated in collective tourist accommodation facilities with accommodation functions in the years 2010-2021. The data suggests an overall increase in the number of tourists accommodated in hotels and motels, from 93,911 in 2010 to 213,808 in 2019.

Table 4. Number of tourists accommodated in collective tourist accommodation facilities with accommodation functions in the years 2010-2021, people

	2010	2018	2019	2020	2021
Hotels and motels	93,911	203,188	213,808	50,581	99,970
Pensions and agro-touristic pensions	13,290	17,709	17,168	14,576	21,411
Touristic villages and other types of rest accommodation (touristic villas, bungalows, camping)	18,386	54,310	55,853	11,519	29,831
Holiday camps for children	63,350	50,969	50,833	219	2,775
Others types (Health-care structures & Hotels for visitors)	40,956	38,432	37,103	13,443	24,209
Total	229,893	364,608	374,765	90,338	178,196

Source: Authors calculations based on data from National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova [19].

However, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of accommodated tourists in 2020 plummeted to 50,581, but began rebounding in 2021, reaching 99,970. The figures for tourists staying in pensions and agro-touristic pensions remained fairly stable over time, with a minor increase from 17,168 in 2019 to 21,411 in 2021. The number of tourists accommodated in touristic villages and other of rest accommodation rose from 54,310 in 2018 to 55,853 in 2019, but then dropped to 11,519 in 2020 due to the pandemic. This number also started to bounce back in 2021, attaining 29,831. The number of tourists accommodated in holiday camps for children has been on a downward trend since 2010, falling from 63,350 to 219 in 2020, but it climbed to 2,775 in 2021. Lastly, the number of tourists accommodated in other types of facilities, such as health-care structures and hotels for visitors, declined from 37,103 in 2019 to 24,209 in 2021. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the number of

accommodated tourists in 2020, but recovery signs emerged in 2021.

Experts report that Moldova's tourism industry experienced unprecedented growth in 2022 and fully rebounded from the downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to statistics, in 2022, domestic (internal) tourism increased by 56% compared to 2021. Encouragement of domestic tourism is backed and promoted by the Government of the Republic of Moldova through a variety of initiatives and campaigns, collaborating with tourism bloggers, journalists, photographers, and tourism experts (such as TURisto ACTIVisto, [www.calatoricugust.com](http://www.calatoricugust.com), ETNOtravel, and Radio Moldova - Popas Turistic) who participate in the fourth edition of the "Ne-am Pornit" campaign, in 2023.

Despite these challenges, there are significant opportunities for the development of gastronomic tourism in the Republic of Moldova. The country's rural areas, with their traditional farming methods and small family farms, offer great potential for agri-tourism,

allowing visitors to experience the country's rural life and learn about traditional farming practices. Many of these farms also offer accommodations and activities such as cooking classes, farm tours, and wine tastings. The development of food-related events and festivals, such as the National Food Day of specific type of dishes and region, could also help to promote the country's gastronomic culture and attract more food tourists.

A combination of factors, including culinary heritage, availability of local food products, quality of dining experiences, accessibility and transportation, marketing and promotion, government support, and local community involvement, can influence the success of food tourism in the Republic of Moldova.

There are several strategies that can be employed to establish and further develop the food tourism industry in Moldova:

- Promote Moldovan cuisine
- Increase food-related activities and events
- Improve infrastructure and services
- Foster collaborations
- Leverage digital platforms

By implementing these strategies, Moldova can establish and further develop its food tourism industry as an important pillar of the country's tourism industry, contributing to economic growth, job creation, and the promotion of its unique culinary heritage.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present Moldova cuisine is a combination of different tastes, flavours, and influences of diverse cultures and civilisations. Also, the in-country, differences between the regions are notable as inherited from earlier generations.

Nowadays, it is hard to imagine living without traveling; it is becoming one of the humans' desires that needs to be met. However, due to globalization, different countries are becoming more similar to each other and starting to lose their uniqueness, so tourists are getting bored and look for something special and not usual to them. Because of the changing travellers' needs, gastronomy or activities, which are related to it, more often become the destination of the trip. At this time, gastronomic tourism is considered to be

the branch of tourism, which is growing the fastest in the world. Gastronomic tourism is becoming an important part of the tourism industry because food has become an essential inducement for differentiating tourism destinations and making them attractive. It becomes attractive, because it includes not only food tasting, but also various gastro events, tours and experiences designed to improve cooking and consumption skills. Gastronomic tourism together provides an opportunity for a city or some local place to increase its visibility in strengthening region's identity, sustaining its cultural heritage. Gastronomic tourism in Moldova is still a relatively new phenomenon, but it is also becoming more popular. Moldovan cuisine is famous for its natural products and original way of preparing food, old but newly applied cooking traditions, and the aesthetics of serving dishes.

There is a lack of the information for the local tourists about the gastronomic tourism events, gastro festivals.

Cooking and eating together with the local population is offered to spread the awareness of the dishes of the ethno-regions. The results obtained during the comparative market analysis revealed that currently the potential of gastronomic tourism in Moldova is mostly not discovered.

In conclusion, the findings of this research demonstrate that gastronomic tourism has significant potential for development in the Republic of Moldova. The country's rich culinary heritage, wine industry, and rural areas offer unique and authentic experiences for food tourists. However, there are several challenges that need to be addressed to fully develop the gastronomic tourism industry in the country.

One of the main challenges is the lack of awareness and promotion of the country's culinary heritage. Efforts to promote and market the country's traditional dishes, wines, and food-related activities could help to attract more food tourists.

Despite its undeniable popularity and merits, the modern classification of ethno-gastronomy is rarely seen as an independent category, and its place in the tourism industry is ambiguous.

At the same time, in recent years, gastronomic tours have become in demand as an independent component, with around 40% of tourists expressing an interest in them. Getting to know the national traditions of different cuisines around the world is becoming a fundamental reason for them to travel.

It is necessary to carry out coordinated organisational and economic planning is a set of measures, means and techniques aimed at the creation, development and subsequent maintenance of a new tourism sphere in each individual region.

The successful development of ethno-gastronomic tourism is impossible to imagine without a clear structuring of the sphere. This will allow the area not only to develop successfully, but also to gain a worthy competitiveness, both on the domestic and on the regional and even global tourist market. Management and development programmes should also be created at both national and regional level.

Overall, this study of gastronomic tourism in the Republic of Moldova is a relevant and significant subject that merits consideration from both scholars and decision-makers. With this investigation, we aspire to aid the growth of this industry and to promote Moldova as a unique gastronomic tourism destination in the region.

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