

PROMOTING ROMANIA'S CULINARY HERITAGE. CASE STUDY: LOCAL GASTRONOMIC POINTS

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Abstract

The paper proposes an analysis of the local gastronomic services market in Romania. The growing interest in culinary tourism through Local Gastronomic Points is evident both globally and nationally. Gastronomic tourism can provide unique culinary experiences, especially in rural households. Clarivate, Google Scholar, and Research Gate articles were used for bibliographic research. The necessary data for the research were selected from the reports of the National Agency for Mountain Areas and the statistics of the National Veterinary Sanitary and Food Safety Authority. The information was statistically processed and graphically represented. The assessment of market concentration was conducted using the Herfindahl-Hirschman and Gini-Struck indices. The research results highlighted the dynamism of the sector against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic but also revealed some deficiencies at the local authorities' level. HHI and GSI values indicate a low market concentration at the county level. Local Gastronomic Point businesses have high development potential, significantly contributing to increasing people's income and rural area development.

Key words: tradition, gastronomic heritage, Romania, local gastronomic points, tourism, market concentration

INTRODUCTION

Culinary tourism is a niche business that emphasizes experiencing local cuisine and culinary traditions.

The target market segment includes tourists seeking to discover new flavours, ingredients, and dishes specific to the regions they visit, specializing in this purpose.

Tourists could actively engage in preparing and tasting local dishes, learn about traditional ingredients, and participate in cooking classes. In many instances, culinary tourism intersects with cultural aspects such as traditions, history, and local craftsmanship [9].

Culinary festivals and gastronomic events are increasingly sought after by consumers of tourist services, providing an opportunity to experience a variety of dishes in one place.

Organizing guided tours with a culinary theme can offer tourists interesting destinations, allowing them to explore the city or region through the lens of local cuisine [17].

The popularity of social media platforms has contributed to the growing interest in culinary tourism, with influencers sharing culinary experiences and recommendations.

In wine regions or those specialized in the production of certain alcoholic beverages, the products from the menus of gastronomic points can be associated with wine tastings, vineyard tours, and themed events.

Local gastronomic points can be key factors in promoting and preserving traditional Romanian cuisine, offering customers authentic experiences of local culinary services.

According to Bădic and Ispas (2021), a tourist destination aiming to strengthen its market position through the development of gastronomic tourism must, first and foremost, identify its own resources and capabilities, define them, and then proceed with concrete actions for protection and enhancement, incorporating them into the region's tourism development strategy [4]. The authors explore

the prospect of establishing a network of Local Gastronomic Points in Braşov County, with the goal of incorporating the region's distinctive gastronomy and tourism into the local economic development.

Numerous European regions have implemented local initiatives to stimulate regional growth through culinary heritage, as seen in cities like Burgos in Spain, Fermo in the Marche region of Italy, and L'Hospitalet de Llobregat in Spain. Food and beverage festivals, along with routes featuring diverse culinary products, are transformed into tourist attractions catering to specific segments of tourists.

The study carried out by Karaman and Girgin (2021) regarding the behavior of foreign tourists concerning local gastronomic services in Turkey revealed that motivational factors, food neophilia, food neophobia, cultural influences, exposure, and gastronomic shopping experience exerted a positive and significant impact on the attitude towards local gastronomic products [10]. However, the research found that experience and health-related factors had no effect on the attitude towards local gastronomic products.

Toader et al. (2021) [21] demonstrate that culinary tourism has experienced significant growth in Romania in recent years. The gastronomic uniqueness of a destination has the potential to attract tourists seeking authenticity and novel culinary experiences.

Romania boasts a rich and diverse gastronomic heritage, serving as a key element of the country's cultural identity. Gastronomy, as an integral component of the national cultural profile, can serve as a catalyst for local economic development through the establishment of local gastronomic points, thereby fostering gastronomic tourism.

Despite the potential, gastronomic tourism in Romania is not yet well-established. However, local and regional gastronomy represents a valuable resource for promoting lesser-known tourist destinations, a potential that can be harnessed through Local Gastronomic Points (LGPs). The implementation of a strategy to promote LGPs, coupled with the development of

mobile applications accessible on smartphones to provide tourists with information about locations, availability, and more, is deemed essential.

Stanciu et al. (2022) [16] proposed an analysis of LGPs, examining their impact on local economies and their role in rural development. The authors conducted a case study of a local gastronomic point and investigated the knowledge of young people regarding local gastronomic points and their contribution to village development.

In this context, the goal of this study is to analyse the local gastronomic services market in Romania, legal aspects, characteristics, dynamics and concentration.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For bibliographic research, open-access articles from Clarivate, Google Scholar, and Research Gate databases were utilized. Official information presented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the National Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority (A.N.S.V.S.A), the Chamber of Deputies, European forums, and professional associations were used for specific legislative regulations in the field.

Data related to Local Gastronomic Points (PGL) is officially furnished by the County Departments of the National Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority (ANSVSA).

The collected information was processed through statistical methods, graphically represented, and interpreted.

The degree of concentration of the local gastronomic services market in Romania at the county level can be analyzed through the calculation of the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI), which is equal to the sum of the squares of the market shares of the factors in the sector (formula 1).

HHI represents an assessment of how a small number of regions can have a high share of the market for traditional products.

The higher the value of HHI, the more the production/distribution is concentrated in a small number of factors.

For HHI values below 1,000 units, the degree

of market concentration is low; for values 1,000 - 1,800, medium, and for values over 1,800, the market is considered concentrated (Consiliul Concurenței, 2020) [6].

$$HHI = \sum G_i^2 \dots \dots \dots (1)$$

where: G_i is the market share of county i ,
The market concentration level at the county level can also be carried out using the Gini-Struck Index (GSI), calculated using Formula 2, as applied by Stanciu et al. (2015) for assessing the degree of concentration in the meat processing industry [20]. This method was initially proposed by the author team Săvoiu, Crăciuneanu, and Țaicu (2010) [15]. This index ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 indicates perfect equality (each county has an equal share) and 1 indicates perfect inequality (all market share is concentrated in one county).
It's worth noting that a higher GSI value suggests a higher degree of market concentration or inequality among counties in terms of market share.

$$GSI = \sqrt{\frac{N \sum G_i^2 - 1}{N - 1}} \dots \dots \dots (2)$$

where: G_i it is the share of the number of LPGs.
For validation, the results were compared with other relevant findings from the specialized literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Legislative regulations on local gastronomic points

At the European level, the provision of public catering services and the functioning of Local Gastronomic Points are governed by food safety regulations (European Parliament and The Council of the European Union, 2004) [8]. At the national level, the establishment and operation of local gastronomic points are regulated by Law 412/2023, published in the Official Gazette No. 1147 on December 19, 2023 (Parliament of Romania, 2023) [13]. According to this law, a local gastronomic point is defined as an establishment in a rural

area that promotes local production, where food products are prepared and served exclusively by the owner or family members. These individuals undergo regular health checks, and the dishes adhere to specific regional recipes. The prepared food is directly served to the end consumer within a maximum of 12 hours from the time of cooking. (Zamfir, 2023) [22].

Local gastronomic points first appeared in Romania in 2017, considered an opportunity for opening a family-type public catering unit where visitors can consume food products specific to a certain region, primarily sourced from the owner's own gastronomic point.

The initiative for this family business concept belongs to the Ivan Patzaichin - Mila 23 Association in 2016, with the first local gastronomic points established in 2018. These small public catering units provide families with the opportunity to promote small-scale tourism activities and capitalize on their own or local community food products

The sector's development contributes to maintaining gastronomic identity, offering visitors the chance to consume homemade dishes they would not normally have access to. These modest gastronomic enterprises play a role in fostering the growth of the local food industry by promoting and enhancing the value of local food production. (Dediu Panaete, 2023) [7].

In 2017, an effort was undertaken to establish a nationwide network of Local Gastronomic Points, drawing inspiration from a best practices model within the European Union. The concept of Local Gastronomic Point (LGP) is relatively new to the domestic tourism sector. LGP serves as a facility dedicated to promoting local primary production, situated in a rural area, where food items are prepared and served based on specific regional recipes, directly to the end consumer, with a maximum capacity of serving 15 people simultaneously [11].

The rural locality includes commune centre villages, component villages of communes, and villages belonging to municipalities or cities.

The local plan encompasses the administrative-territorial unit to which the

Local Gastronomic Point is affiliated, the residence of the individual owning the Local Gastronomic Point, and the adjacent administrative-territorial units.

The food products offered by the Local Gastronomic Point are prepared from locally available raw materials, mainly from primary production at the owner's own farm, from producers, fishermen, hunters, gatherers, and collectors of non-wood forest products.

Local Gastronomic Point can operate in existing premises in private homes, agricultural farms, fish farms, mountain pastures, apiaries, cellars, fisherman's shelters, hunting reserves, game farms, mushroom and wild berry collection centres, hunting centres, forestry offices, monasteries, as well as other constructions and facilities in a rural locality, where one or more activities related to primary agricultural production, fishing, hunting, harvesting, or collecting non-wood forest products take place," as stated in the legislative initiative.

The establishment of a Local Gastronomic Point is open to both individuals and legal entities, subject to compliance with existing legal regulations regarding sanitary-veterinary registration and food safety. Such compliance must be verified through the Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Directorate in the county where the Local Gastronomic Point operates [11].

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR), operating through its subordinate units at the national, county, and local levels, may organize complimentary professional training courses for individuals or legal entities interested in establishing a Local Gastronomic Point. This initiative falls within the competencies established by relevant legislation.

MADR puts forth measures to provide support for the establishment or assistance of activities related to Local Gastronomic Points, subject to budgetary allocations. These measures are implemented through the National Mountain Zone Agency.

Through the National Mountain Zone Agency [12], The ministry compiles and oversees the Register of Local Gastronomic Points, utilizing data from the publicly accessible list

on the website of the National Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority (ANSVSA) [3].

In a broader context, facilities used for handling food items must adhere to cleanliness standards and be maintained in good condition to mitigate the risk of contamination. They should be equipped with appropriate hygienic-sanitary and refrigeration facilities to ensure a clean working environment and the safe handling of products, as well as to maintain and monitor suitable food temperatures.

Local gastronomic points present a valuable choice for enthusiasts of rural and gastronomic tourism, accentuating the authenticity of culinary experiences. Remarkable is the emergence of specific forms of rural tourism promotion in Romania, exemplified by platforms like Localm.ro.

This booking platform goes beyond the somewhat traditional accommodation section: ("Rest") ("Odihna"), also includes the "Food" ("Bucate") sections (including local gastronomy points and "Customs" ("Obiceiuri") (village traditions and activities).

These culinary establishments also serve as an opportunity for the sustainable development of rural environments, contributing, among other things, to job creation in rural areas, fostering community cohesion, and preserving culinary traditions.

Local gastronomic points in Romania

Data related to Local Gastronomic Points is officially furnished by the County Departments of the National Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority (ANSVSA) [3].

The information was updated in most county agencies in November/December 2023. Publicly available information is challenging to access on the websites of the County Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Directorates (DSVSA).

There are differences between the figures reported by ANSVSA and the reports of the National Mountain Zone Agency, although both institutions are under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

On some agency websites, the list of

authorized economic operators is displayed directly, while on others, it is available through a search using the keywords "local gastronomic points" in the dedicated search field. At other agencies, it needs to be identified by going through successive steps: Economic Operators/Animal Origin Products/List of retail units for animal origin products registered for sanitary veterinary. Files with authorized operators may be available on one or multiple pages, but each must be reviewed (usually located in positions 32-33 on the list of files).

Official information regarding ANSVSA awareness campaigns about Local Gastronomic Points conducted in 2017 is present on all verified agency websites. Some agencies also provide additional information about prevention and awareness campaigns for LGP operators regarding potential food born diseases, especially those of animal origin.

In some situations, such as in Braşov County, no information about authorized LGPs was found on the agency's website. The information was collected from the Gastro Local Association website (<https://gastrolocal.ro/#>) [2] by searching in specific fields (Photo 1).



Photo 1. LGP search using the site of "Asociația Gastro Local"

Source: Authors, by using "Asociația Gastro Local" site: <https://gastrolocal.ro>, 2023 [2].

In the introduction, the location can be searched based on basic criteria: county, locality, menu categories (including vegetarian), places with children's playgrounds, accommodation options etc.

The locations are available in a catalogue or can be searched on the associated map of the website. The information is presented on the association's website (www.gastrolocal.ro), on

social media platforms Facebook and Instagram (facebook.com/gastrolocal.ro), or can be obtained additionally through phone calls or email messages (Photo 2).

Access to new LGPs aiming to join the association is easily achieved by completing membership forms available on the website in the "Join Us" section (<https://gastrolocal.ro/formular-pasul1>) [2].

Exploring the "Catalogue" section of the website provides the necessary information to pique the tourist's interest, including details about the reservation process (direct phone reservation is an option under "Call the Location").

A detailed presentation of the LGP operator, including the use of a map with satellite orientation information directly to the targeted point, is available by accessing the "More Information" section.

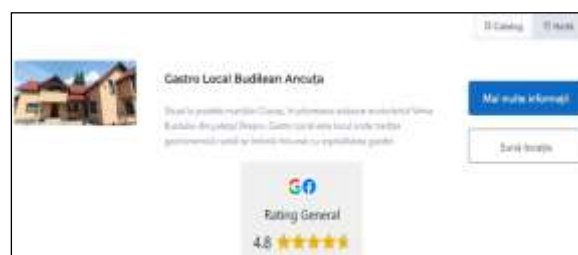


Photo 2. LGP at the Asociation Gastro Local, Section "Catalog"

Source: Authors, by using Asociația Gastro Local site, 2023. <https://gastrolocal.ro> [2].

On the website, events of common interest for the association are also promoted under the "Events" section, with the latest promoted event being the National Conference of Local Gastronomic Points in Romania, which took place in the tourist resort of Vama Buzăului in Braşov County, from October 21st to October 22nd, 2023 (<https://gastrolocal.ro/evenimente>) [2], [14].

From the perspective of English-speaking users, the presence of an English version would be beneficial, given the increasing influx of foreign tourists, primarily interested in authenticity and local traditions.

The progression of Local Gastronomic Point (LGP) openings in Romania, as per the Activity Report of the National Agency for Mountain Products for the year 2022, is illustrated in Figure 1. The data indicates a

substantial increase compared to 2018, marking the emergence of the first initiatives in this field.

The remarkable growth in the number of registered operators at the national level can be attributed to the availability of non-reimbursable grants, without co-financing, ranging from 50,000 to 70,000 euros.

This funding opportunity is made possible through the National Rural Development Program (PNDR), falling under Measure 6.2, which supports the establishment of non-agricultural activities in rural areas (Agency for Financing Rural Investments AFIR, 2023) [1]. The dynamics of the number of local gastronomic points (LGP) in Romania is presented in Figure 1.

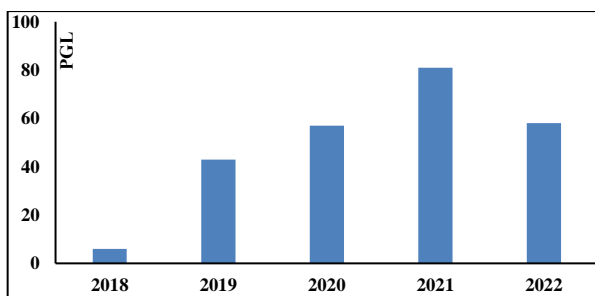


Fig. 1. Local Gastronomic Points in Romania
 Source: Authors, by using National Agency for Mountain Products Report, 2022 [12].

COVID-19 pandemic has facilitated the opening of new LGPs, as tourists sought to avoid crowds and the risk of contamination (Stanciu et al., 2020) [19].

Romanians have been searching for more isolated locations nationally, preferably in rural, mountainous, or Danube Delta areas (Stanciu, 2022) [18].

In 2023, the statistics gathered from the 42 County Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Directorates (DSVSA) revealed the registration of 251 Local Gastronomic Points (LGPs) across Romania.

The data was compiled from the websites of the respective county agencies (ANSVSA, 2023) [3].

Analysis of the information available on the agencies' websites revealed the following aspects: Most agencies update their information in December/November.

7 agencies had up-to-date information at the

time of querying the platform (Arges, Bistrita Năsăud, Bucharest, Dâmbovita, Dolj, Galați, Suceava).

Some agencies haven't updated PGL information for several months: Giurgiu (April 6, 2023), Mehedinți (May 19, 2023), Covasna (August 28, 2023), Sălaj (September 1, 2023), Harghita (September 15, 2023), Timis (September 30, 2023).

Most agencies without updated information have 0 registered operators. DSVSA Brașov has no registered PGL operators on its site, while the Gastro Local Association platform mentions 16 functional points.

Ten counties have 0 registered PGL operators (Bacău, Bihor, Bucharest, Călărași, Dolj, Giurgiu, Ialomița, Iași, Ilfov, Teleorman).

8 counties have 1 PGL (Botoșani, Brăila, Dâmbovița, Galați, Mehedinți, Olt, Vaslui, Vrancea), 4 have 2 PGL (Constanța, Mureș, Sălaj, Timiș), 2 counties have 3 PGL each (Covasna, Vâlcea).

About 60% of Romania's counties have fewer than 5 registered PGL operators at the county level. Only 9 counties have over 10 registered PGL, with Tulcea leading the list (42), followed by Alba and Sibiu (25), and Brașov (16) (Figure 2).

With 174 registered PGLs, these 9 counties concentrate around 70% of the total registered at the national level.

Most operators are concentrated in these 9 counties. In Brașov, gastronomic points are established in Vama Buzăului, Fundata, Sâmbăta de Jos, and Drăguș [5].

In Tulcea, tourists can access gastronomic points in Sulina, Murighiol, Mila 23, and Crișan. In Sibiu, meals can be enjoyed in families in Cislădie, Cristian, Arpașu de Sus.

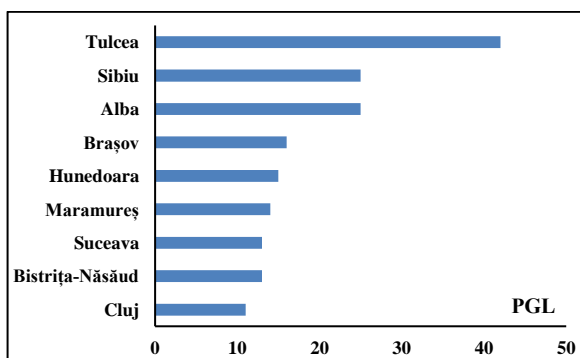


Fig. 2. PGL by county in Romania (2023)
 Source: Authors, by using ANSVSA (2023) [3].

Local Gastronomic Points are also present in Alba (Roşia Montana, Rimetea, Câmpeni) and Maramureş (Borşa, Vişeu de Sus, Suciul de Sus, etc).

The concentration level of the local gastronomic services market in Romania at the county level can be assessed by calculating the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI). According to the data presented in Table 1, the calculated HHI value is 741.4171, indicating a low degree of market concentration. The action is taken within county *i* in the total registered at the national level (251), and $N=42$ is the number of

counties in Romania.

The calculated values of HHI and GSI are presented in Table 1.

If the GSI value tends to 100, this indicates a high value of market concentration, and if the value of the coefficient tends to 0, it indicates a low concentration value of the structure of the analysed market.

The calculated value for GSI, according to Formula 2, is 27.18, indicating a low degree of concentration in the market of local gastronomic services at the county level, similar to the HHI calculation.

Table 1. HHI and GSI Calculation

No.	County	Units	G_i	G_i^2	No.	County	Units	G_i	G_i^2
1.	Alba	25	9.96	99.2048	22	Harghita	5	1.99	3.9682
2.	Arad	5	1.99	3.9682	23	Hunedoara	15	5.98	35.7137
3.	Argeş	7	2.79	7.7777	24	Ialomiţa	0	0.00	0.0000
4.	Bacău	0	0.00	0.0000	24	Iaşi	0	0.00	0.0000
5.	Bihor	0	0.00	0.0000	26	Ilfov	0	0.00	0.0000
6.	Bistriţa-Năsăud	13	5.18	26.8250	27	Maramureş	14	5.58	31.1106
7.	Botoşani	1	0.40	0.1587	28	Mehedinţi	1	0.40	0.1587
8.	Braşov	16	6.37	40.6343	29	Mureş	2	0.80	0.6349
9.	Brăila	1	0.40	0.1587	30	Neamţ	7	2.79	7.7777
10	Bucureşti	0	0.00	0.0000	31	Olt	1	0.40	0.1587
11	Buzău	6	2.39	5.7142	32	Prahova	8	3.19	10.1586
12	Caraş-Severin	5	1.99	3.9682	33	Satu Mare	4	1.59	2.5396
13	Călăraşi	0	0.00	0.0000	34	Sălaj	2	0.80	0.6349
14	Cluj	11	4.38	19.2060	35	Sibiu	25	9.96	99.2048
15	Constanţa	2	0.80	0.6349	36	Suceava	13	5.18	26.8250
16	Covasna	3	1.20	1.4285	37	Teleorman	0	0.00	0.0000
17	Dâmboviţa	1	0.40	0.1587	38	Timiş	2	0.80	0.6349
18	Dolj	0	0.00	0.0000	39	Tulcea	42	16.73	279.9956
19	Galaţi	1	0.40	0.1587	40	Vaslui	1	0.40	0.1587
20	Giurgiu	0	0.00	0.0000	41	Vâlcea	3	1.20	1.4285
21	Gorj	8	3.19	10.1586	42	Vrancea	1	0.40	0.1587
						Total	251	100%	721.4171

Source: Authors, by using ANSVSA (2023) [3].

CONCLUSIONS

The market of local gastronomic services in Romania is a dynamic sector with a spectacular evolution since the establishment of the first establishment in 2018.

The main areas where Local Gastronomic Points (LGP) have developed are the Danube Delta and regions in Transylvania located in the center of the country, characterized by specific and diversified culinary traditions. The leading position of Tulcea County in the LGP hierarchy can be explained by the

association of these small local businesses with the initiative of Patzaichin, the lack of other dining alternatives, and the specific nature of the area where meals rich in aquatic products are prepared in a traditional fishing style.

The analysis of the concentration level of tourist services at the county level resulted in moderate values of HHI and GSI, indicating the absence of concentration processes.

An analysis of the factors influencing the market concentration should also consider the historical tradition, entrepreneurial spirit of

the residents, development of transport and utilities networks, and the average income per capita.

The analysis conducted provides valuable insights into the development of strategies for superior exploitation of the national culinary potential and the creation of best working practices.

These can serve as business models for small enterprises in less developed regions, particularly in terms of tourist services.

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