

LOCAL GASTRONOMIC POINTS – A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE VALUE CHAIN IN RURAL TOURISM FROM ROMANIA

Mirela STANCIU, Cristina-Anca DANCIU, Anca POP-DAVID, Iuliana ANTONIE

”Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, Food Industry and Environmental Protection, 7-9, Dr. Ion Rațiu Street, 550003, Sibiu, Romania, E-mails: mirela.stanciu@ulbsibiu.ro, cristina.danciu@ulbsibiu.ro, anca.pop@ulbsibiu.ro, iuliana.antonie@ulbsibiu.ro

Corresponding author: mirela.stanciu@ulbsibiu.ro

Abstract

This study examines Local Gastronomic Points (LGP) as instruments for sustainable rural development in Romania, with a focus on Sibiu County, using literature review, statistical processing of official data, field observations. The article analyzes the rapid growth of LGPs—small, family-run dining units serving traditional dishes made from local ingredients. Since 2018, LGP numbers have increased by 282%, reflecting their popularity and economic impact. Concentrated in mountain regions with established tourism infrastructure, LGPs enhance destination image, preserve intangible culinary heritage, and support local producers. Findings show that LGPs stimulate rural economies, reduce depopulation, and contribute to sustainable food practices by linking agriculture with tourism. They also highlight the need for marketing strategies, digital engagement, and youth education to maximize their potential within Romania's rural development framework.

Key words: rural gastronomic tourism, culinary tourism, food tourism, intangible cultural heritage, Local Gastronomic Points (LGP), tourism value chains, local development, Romania

INTRODUCTION

The gastronomic specificity of each country and region represents a key socio-cultural factor contributing to sustainable tourism development [66]. Gastronomy plays a pivotal role in tourism, serving as an expression of local identity and a primary motivation for tourists to visit a destination [32, 34, 55].

Beyond its economic significance, gastronomy constitutes a medium through which local culture is expressed [25] and establishes a connection between culinary heritage and the surrounding environment [8]. Culinary heritage encompasses a region's gastronomic identity, including traditional recipes, preparation methods, dining customs, and social interactions arising from the production and sharing of food [59]. Local gastronomic identity not only reflects regional culture and culinary traditions [33] but also emphasizes the quality, authenticity, and uniqueness of local foods and dishes. This identity is reinforced through the organization of diverse gastronomic events, which over time fosters tourist loyalty to the destination.

The gastronomic identity of a region is largely shaped by its geographical and cultural characteristics [49] and is grounded in traditional culinary practices specific to each nation [61].

The image of a gastronomic tourism destination is closely associated with the taste and quality of food, its emotional and health-related value, authenticity, and diversity [16, 42, 55]. Moreover, destination image significantly influences tourists' behavioral intentions [48, 73], underscoring the importance of coordinated efforts among all stakeholders in cultivating and promoting a destination's gastronomic image. Consumer behavior in relation to gastronomic services emerges from the complex interplay of various factors, including individual personality traits, the uniqueness of the gastronomic experience, and social media influence [26]. Long et al. (2024) [38] identified 49 factors affecting the development of gastronomic tourism destinations, with destination marketing being the most significant. Fourteen of these factors are directly related to food sourcing, safety,

and quality, all of which contribute to local sustainable development through the interconnectedness of multiple elements.

According to [68] key trends shaping gastronomic tourism include the need to market authenticity, focus on local food, leverage artificial intelligence, prioritize sustainability, extend tourist stays, encourage travel to lesser-known destinations, promote gastronomic diversity, and support health and wellness tourism. Additionally, global warming is increasingly affecting the production of foods registered under quality schemes with protected designations.

García-Pérez et al (2024) [28] highlight that gastronomic tourism experiences are influenced by both personal factors and destination image. They emphasize that future research should consider the cultural context of each country and analyze these factors from the perspective of all stakeholders, with particular attention to service quality [36].

Literature Review: Gastronomic Tourism/ Culinary Tourism/ Food Tourism

Gastronomic, culinary, and food tourism encompass activities directly related to the primary production of food and its valorization [47]. These forms of tourism include serving traditional dishes directly at local producers' locations, product tastings, visits to local processors, cooking workshops, gastronomic tours, as well as classical or alternative gastronomic events such as brunches, local or traditional product fairs, and farmers' markets [29, 72]. Product tastings are closely associated with the emotions elicited in tourists, which in turn directly influence their behavioral intentions and attitudes [44]. Collectively, these activities contribute to the preservation of local identity [43] and the conservation of rural landscapes designed to meet human needs.

Gastronomic tourism is grounded in the production and consumption of local culinary dishes and is widely recognized as a component of heritage tourism [11]. Its impact on the local economy is significant, accounting for approximately 25% of economic activity in relevant areas [68]. This form of tourism provides unique products, services, and experiences that are memorable for tourists, contributing to their well-being while

integrating into local value chains [77]. Food tourism can take different forms such as gastronomic tours, cooking workshops, tastings, visits to agricultural producers or local producers' markets [74].

Sustainable gastronomic tourism revitalizes local communities [47], operates within specific social, cultural, and psychological contexts [13], and fosters communication between residents and tourists. It also contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage and promotes intercultural exchanges [35, 75]. Culinary tourism emphasizes food sourcing and preparation methods [58], and tourism marketing strategies should promote local culinary activities, encourage the consumption of locally produced foods, and enhance service quality. These strategies are essential for sustainability while simultaneously valorizing local culinary traditions and producers [20]. Culinary tourism generates income for local residents and serves as an instrument for sustainable development. Policies supporting this sector should adopt a holistic approach to local gastronomy, integrating it into ecosystem services, with an emphasis on conserving agricultural and food genetic resources that contribute to regional food security [5]. Recent research indicates that tourists who prefer local gastronomy value the quality of service and the dining atmosphere. Positive correlations exist between the number of dining establishments, population size, and overnight stays at the destination level [39]. Additionally, some tourists seek one-day culinary experiences that provide a holistic engagement encompassing dining, learning, culture, and nature [40].

Entrepreneurs in Food Tourism

Successful management of restaurants and dining establishments in the context of food tourism requires a comprehensive set of knowledge, skills, and competencies [75]. Key priorities include understanding trends in tourists' culinary preferences, integrating local ingredients, and fostering collaboration with regional producers.

Restaurants capitalize on local knowledge embedded in recipes, dishes, and cooking techniques, which collectively reflect regional gastronomic culture. This approach

strengthens community ties and enhances the attractiveness of the destination, positioning local cuisine as an effective marketing tool [32, 69].

Entrepreneurs in gastronomy are encouraged to adopt online marketing strategies and collaborate with digital promotion and booking platforms, paying close attention to tourist reviews. Online reviews play a crucial role in promoting destinations, particularly in highlighting the authenticity, freshness, and local origin of culinary offerings [3, 53]. The integration of gastronomic offerings into social media platforms not only increases the destination's appeal but also supports the local economy [1].

Blanco-Moreno et al (2024) [9] suggest a novel research methodology that employs artificial intelligence to analyze tourist sentiment expressed through social media posts, hashtags, and comments, providing valuable insights for destination marketing. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the reliance of consumers on digital solutions for food procurement [17], underlining the need for HoReCa entrepreneurs to invest in enhancing employees' digital competencies and adopting mobile applications [70]. Furthermore, implementing sustainable practices in daily operations is essential, including selective waste collection, food waste reduction, and optimization of waste treatment processes [7, 79], thereby aligning gastronomy entrepreneurship with both environmental and economic sustainability.

Young People and Food Tourism

Educating and training rural youth in organic agriculture, traditional production methods, and their involvement in agritourism and gastronomic tourism can contribute to transforming current global food systems and addressing many of the challenges facing rural areas [54].

Young people's culinary preferences in the context of gastronomic tourism can be influenced through social media platforms. Several authors argue that young people themselves act as promoters of gastronomic tourism on these platforms, as they are digitally literate [67] and frequently post images of the dishes they consume or reviews of their

culinary experiences on social networks. Understanding generational habits of content creation and sharing related to food tourism can be leveraged in marketing strategies targeting these audiences [52].

Food Sustainability and the Impact of Tourism Development on Communities

Globally, gastronomy is dynamic, with its evolution driven by societal changes, concerns regarding health and food safety [57], and technological advancements [78]. In this context, food must be approached holistically, with emphasis on biodiversity conservation and as an opportunity to create connections among people and foster social exchange [60]. Increasingly, there is a need to promote local products as fresh, flavorful, and seasonal, while encouraging education around smarter and more sustainable consumption [30].

Local gastronomic products form part of national cultural heritage [62] and are most often marketed through short food supply chains [12, 64]. Consumers are becoming increasingly knowledgeable about gastronomy, paying greater attention to food sustainability, preferring organic products, purchasing locally, and supporting small producers [56].

Currently, Romania has 15 food products registered under European quality schemes and 753 products nationally recognized as traditional foods [23]. At a regional level, the presence of foods or culinary products registered under various quality schemes is associated by tourists with the authenticity of local gastronomy and enhances the tourism experience, providing educational value [22] while also contributing to mitigating rural depopulation. According to producers and entrepreneurs involved in creating such products, these play an essential role in increasing the visibility of both a tourist destination and local producers [27].

Local gastronomy, specific to each country and region, represents part of the potential intangible heritage. Preserving and valorizing this heritage strengthens local identity and supports sustainable tourism [10]. Local gastronomy should be promoted as a resilient, competitive, and sustainable tourism product [73]. It creates local value chains [19] and can

be particularly effectively promoted through gastronomic events and investments in digital marketing [21].

Residents of rural areas are custodians of traditional knowledge related to local food culture [80], closely tied to traditional practices of producing fresh, flavorful, and healthy foods and dishes. Local food culture is increasingly being highlighted through tourism, with a strong connection observed between the registration of dishes under quality schemes and sales volumes [24].

Despite the significant influence of social and natural environments on a nation's culinary traditions [37], traditional knowledge of wild and cultivated medicinal and aromatic plants and their use in local cuisine remains particularly important. Integrating this knowledge into gastronomic tourism helps preserve cultural values, foster local development [4], and initiate sustainable forms of eco-tourism [50]. In multiethnic areas, local gastronomy is in constant evolution, with various ethnic groups transmitting their culinary knowledge to one another [61].

In this context, the present research aimed to assess Local Gastronomic Points (LGPs) as tools for a sustainable rural development in Romania, emphasizing the state in Sibiu County, based on literature review on the topic, statistical processing of the official empirical data and the observations collected from the field.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research work was based on documentary research, literature review, statistical analysis of secondary data, observations, content analysis, regarding the localities with Local gastronomic points from Sibiu County, Romania.

The methodology included at the beginning desk research methods and procedures to collect the primary data from official information sources and data bases regarding lodging and travel services provided. In this case it was used the site of The National Authority for Tourism. Also, the data were picked up from the National Agency of Mountain Area or from National Institute of

Statistics. After setting up the data collection for this research article, there were calculated some tourist traffic indicators of rural tourism in different Sibiu villages (touristtrafficdensity, touristtrafficintensity, and tourist operation rate), using known methodology [36]. Excel, v. 365 Microsoft, was used for data processing. *Tourist traffic density* (TD) is the indicator that directly links tourist traffic with the resident population (on January 1). It is calculated as the ratio between the number of tourists arriving in the area (TA) and the resident population of the area on January 1 (P).

The intensity of tourist flow was determined dividing the number of overnight stays to the resident population in the village (on 1 January).

TI= (2)

where:

Ti = tourist traffic intensity Os = number of tourist overnight stays P = total population on 1 January

To assess the size of the tourist development in the studied area, it was evaluated the *tourist operation rate*, whose formula involves calculating the ratio between the total number of accommodation units and the resident population.

where:

Tfr = tourism function rate Tacu = total number of accommodation units P = total population on 1 January

The main research objectives are:

01 Presentation of the Development of Gastronomic Points in Romania

O2 Review of the Literature on Gastronomic Points in Romania

O3 Establishing the link between the functioning of the PGLs and the stage of rural tourism development in villages in Sibiu County, Romania.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Concept of Local Gastronomic Points (PGLs) and their evolution in Romania according to Law 412/2023, Local Gastronomic Points are units for the utilization of locally sourced food products within rural communities. They may operate within private households, agricultural farms, or locations where activities related to primary production are carried out.

In 2024, the Gastro Local Association developed a best practices guide for the operation of local gastronomic points, according to which local producers may serve meals to groups of up to 15 people. The primary mission of the Gastro Local Association is to support local producers and promote traditional Romanian gastronomy [6].

Beginning in 2023, the association has organized an annual PGL conference aimed at highlighting the sector's contribution to sustainable rural development.

Between 2018 and the beginning of 2025, 516 such family-run food service units were registered [45], representing an approximate 282% increase compared to the 186 PGLs recorded in 2021 [51]. These units operate in rural areas, contributing to the direct valorization of products and increasing farmers' incomes.

Their national distribution is presented in Figure 1. The counties with the highest number of PGLs are Brașov (106), Tulcea (57), Cluj (38), Sibiu (33), Alba (30), Hunedoara (28), Bistrița-Năsăud (26), and Suceava (20). Thus, approximately 65.5% of all PGLs nationwide are concentrated within these eight counties.

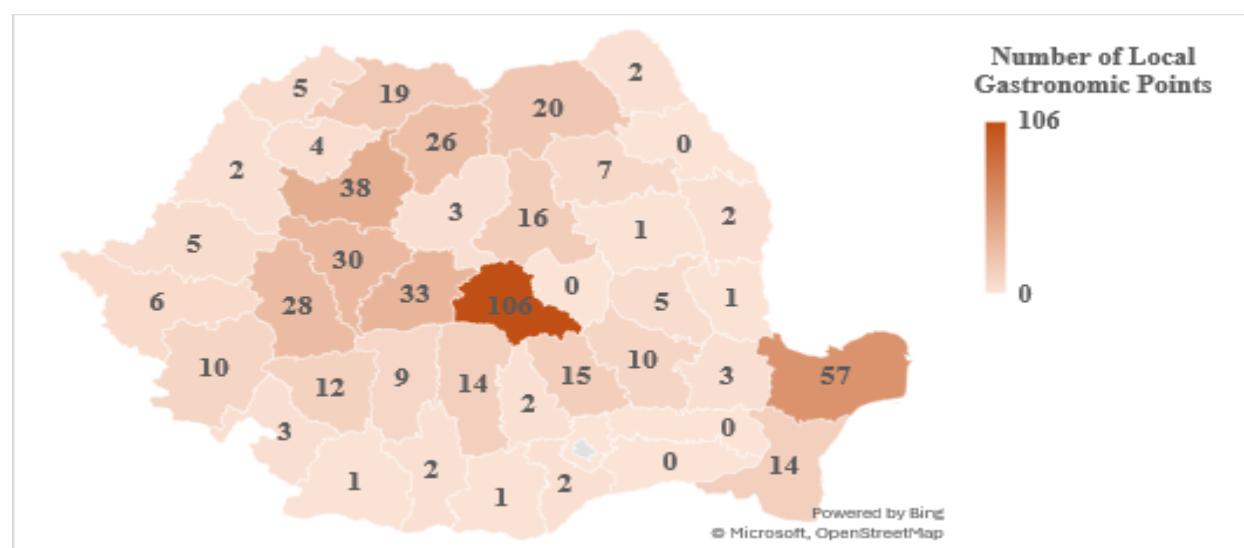


Fig. 1. National Distribution of Local Gastronomic Points in Romania

Source: own design based on [45].

Within the Central Region, 188 Local Gastronomic Points (PGLs) are registered, representing 36.43% of the total nationwide. Brașov County holds 106 PGLs, accounting for 20.5% of all PGLs at the national level.

Romanian Literature on PGLs

Local gastronomic points are located in rural areas and serve as a bridge between agriculture and tourism, contributing to the definition of a destination's image and the preservation of both local and national identity [65]. The establishment of PGLs as part of rural

gastronomic tourism in Romania has experienced remarkable growth [15].

Tourists spending their holidays in rural areas and dining at PGLs are interested in consuming local dishes prepared according to traditional recipes, using locally sourced raw materials. They are informed and aware that menus offered at PGLs typically include only two types of soups and two main dishes, which they may choose from. Tourists associate local gastronomy with "a sense of place" and local culinary specialties with rural tourism destinations—an association that can be

promoted as part of local gastronomic culture [14]. Yang et al. (2024) [76] discuss the concept of rural gastronomic tourism, emphasizing that it integrates food, services, and environment, and highlighting that tourist preferences in the post-pandemic era have shifted toward greater attention to the quality of the rural environment.

Establishing the Link between the Functioning of PGLs in Sibiu County and Rural Tourism

The history of organizing alternative gastronomic events in Sibiu County dates back to around 2017, when, through the initiative of the “My Transylvania” Association, connections were forged between small producers from Sibiu’s villages and visitors

invited to attend weekend brunches [63]. Since the 2000s, the local gastronomy typical of Transylvanian villages has been showcased at festivals held in the mountain villages of the county. Among these are the Cheese and Plum Brandy Festival, organized in the commune of Răşinari, and the Peony Festival, held in Gura Râului commune.

By the end of 2024, Sibiu County had 33 registered Local Gastronomic Points operating in 22 communes, with the highest concentrations found in Biertan and Râu Sadului. The evolution of local gastronomic points from their establishment in 2018 to 2024 is presented in Figure 2. Notably, 10 of the 33 existing PGLs in Sibiu County were established in 2024 alone.

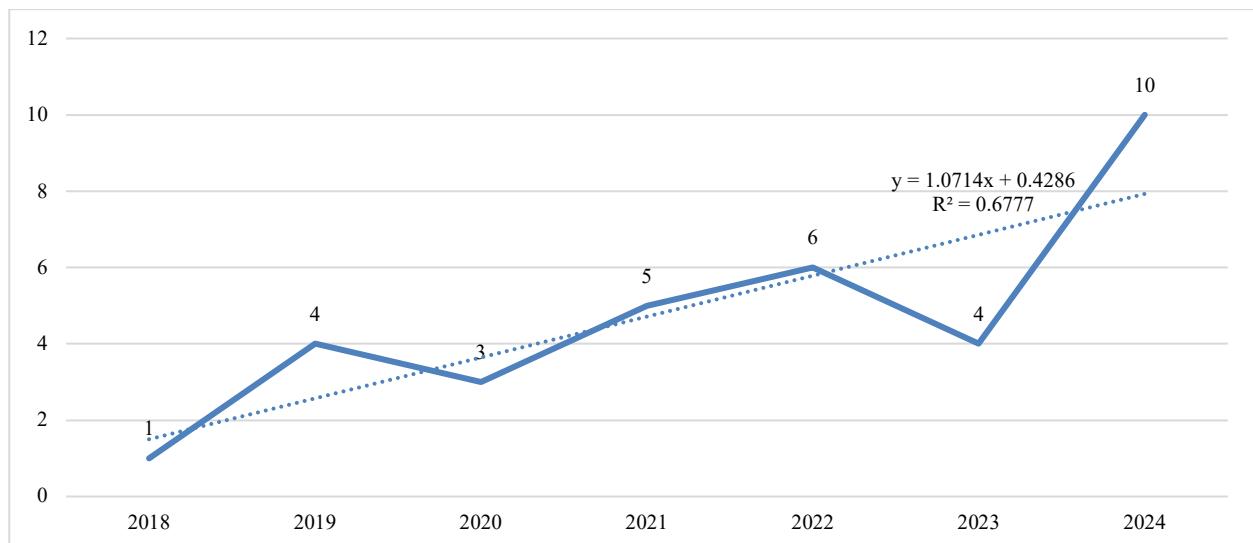


Fig. 2. Evolution of the Number of PGLs, in Sibiu County

Source: own calculation based on [45].

In general, Local Gastronomic Points (PGLs) have been established in localities where tourist accommodation facilities are available. The communes hosting PGLs and having the highest number of accommodation structures in the county are: Cârțișoara (48), Porumbacu de Jos (35), and Gura Râului (34). Their creation reflects a local need to provide public food services (Table 1) and to capitalize on raw materials produced within peasant households. These communes are located in the mountainous area and are attractive due to their scenic landscapes and the way local traditions have been preserved. The mountainous area is subject to several natural and human

constraints such as rugged relief, isolation, distance from administrative centers, population aging, and depopulation [71] yet it remains preferred by tourists seeking to spend their holidays in a natural, picturesque setting and to enjoy gastronomy based on fresh, flavorful, and healthy foods [51].

Agyeiwaah and Zhao (2024) [2] highlighted the relationship between rural residents' quality of life, their attachment to place, and their support for organizing tourism events and promoting tourism development. Local gastronomy integrates local agroecological practices with tourism and contributes to preserving knowledge related to agriculture

and food preparation among the local population [31].

The highest values of tourist traffic density for 2023 were recorded in the communes of Râu Sadului (9,312), Cârțișoara (7,919), and Arpașu de Jos (3,071). The highest values of tourist traffic intensity for the same year were also found in Râu Sadului (21,679), Cârțișoara (12,924), and Arpașu de Jos (4,210). Values above 1.0 for tourist traffic density and intensity were also recorded in Gura Râului,

Porumbacu de Jos, and Șura Mare. The highest tourist operation rates for 2023 were observed in Cârțișoara (0.035), Râu Sadului (0.022), and Porumbacu de Jos (0.011). The communes of Cârțișoara, Arpașu de Jos, and Porumbacu de Jos belong to the ethnogeographical area “Țara Oltului,” located at the foot of the Făgăraș Mountains, while Râu Sadului belongs to “Mărginimea Sibiului,” a nationally and internationally renowned tourist area [18].

Table 1. Localities in Sibiu County Where PGLs Have Been Established, Number and Capacity of Tourist Accommodation Structures, and Tourist Traffic Indicators

No .	Locality	Populatio n at 1 January 2,023	Numbe r of PGL	Number touristic structure s	Numbe r of rooms	Numbe r of places	Numbe r of arrival s (2023)	Number of overnight stays (2023)	Touris m traffic density	Touris m traffic intensit y	Tourist operatio n rate
1	Loamneș, (Alămor village)	2,851	1	0	0	0	0	0	0.000	0.000	0.000
2	Alma Vii	1,812	1	1	5	10	0	0	0.000	0.000	0.000
3	Arpașu de Jos	2,805	2	13	69	146	8,614	11,809	3.071	4.210	0.005
4	Sat Bradu	932	2	2	13	27	0	0	0.000	0.000	0.000
5	Biertan	3,000	3	16	75	170	778	1,393	0.259	0.464	0.005
6	Bruiu	962	1	4	12	35	0	0	0.000	0.000	0.004
7	Chirpăr	1,895	1	2	6	16	375	824	0.198	0.435	0.001
8	Cisnădioara	25,931	2	13	128	336	8,724	17,343	0.336	0.669	0.001
9	Cisnădie		1	26	97	247					
10	Cârțișoara	1,376	1	48	444	1,035	10,896	17,784	7.919	12.924	0.035
11	Dârlos	3,500	1	1	2	4	0	0	0.000	0.000	0.000
12	Gura Râului	3,818	2	34	226	469	7,136	13,861	1.869	3.630	0.009
13	Hoghilag	2,538	1	2	8	17	672	998	0.265	0.393	0.001
14	Jina	3,559	1	6	76	152	750	1,202	0.211	0.338	0.002
15	Laslea	4,279	1	6	27	78	682	1,316	0.159	0.308	0.001
16	Moșna	3,715	2	6	15	38	139	294	0.037	0.079	0.002
17	Rosia (Nucet village)	6,296	1	8	27	63	0	0	0.000	0.000	0.000
18	Porumbacu de Jos	3,220	2	35	189	483	6,294	10,777	1.955	3.347	0.011
19	Râu Sadului	552	3	12	80	158	5,140	11,967	9.312	21.679	0.022
20	Sadu	2,724	2	7	39	89	214	425	0.079	0.156	0.003
21	Șeica Mare	4,567	1	2	12	24	271	419	0.059	0.092	0.000
22	Șura Mare	5,274	1	4	47	97	5,430	7,106	1.030	1.347	0.001
	TOTAL	85,606	33	248	1,597	3,694	56,115	97,518	0.656	1.139	0.003

Source: own calculation based on [41, 45, 46].

CONCLUSIONS

The gastronomic popularity of Sibiu County, located in central Romania, reached its peak in 2009, when it was awarded the title of “European Gastronomic Region,” thereby highlighting the area’s culinary potential shaped by centuries of coexistence among Romanians, Saxons, and Hungarians.

Entrepreneurs engaged in rural gastronomic tourism represent new rural actors who valorize the resources of agricultural holdings and local communities, thereby contributing to rural revitalization.

Educating and training rural youth and involving them in agritourism and gastronomic tourism can contribute to transforming current global food systems, addressing many of the

challenges facing rural areas, and stimulating local entrepreneurship.

Local Gastronomic Points (PGLs), established within peasant households in Romania, promote the pluriactivity of farming families, enabling them to earn additional income while preserving and showcasing traditional knowledge related to food production and preparation. This type of food service aligns with the “farm-to-fork” strategy, as most ingredients used in culinary preparations come from their own production or from other local producers, thereby adding value to agricultural raw materials. Families involved in operating a local gastronomic point share their stories with visitors, offering an authentic gastronomic experience rooted in a particular lifestyle and tradition of food production and processing. They actively participate in preserving local culinary heritage and traditions related to crop cultivation, animal husbandry, and agricultural processing. In this way, families become central to local rural tourism offerings, around which the entire community is strengthened.

Local Gastronomic Points are part of gastronomic tourism and have the potential to enhance the competitiveness of Romanian rural tourism. Entrepreneurs managing PGLs should consider creating one-day tourism packages that include visits to both natural and cultural attractions in and around their localities.

The entire community in the tourist villages where local gastronomic outlets and tourist accommodation facilities operate strengthens the tourism value chain and contributes to the development of the area.

Local public administrations must collaborate with county tourism associations and NGOs specializing in the organization of alternative gastronomic events. Hosting gastronomic events in villages promotes the area's natural and cultural potential and increases the tourist appeal of the locality.

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