

Thematic Routes and Gastronomic Itineraries: A Descriptive Exploration of a Developing Gastronomic Hotspot Named “Mrizi i Zanave – Fishtë”

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Abstract: This study explores the development of thematic routes and gastronomic itineraries as strategic tools for positioning emerging food destinations, focusing on Mrizi i Zanave in Fishtë. As a prominent example of Albania’s farm-to-table movement, Mrizi i Zanave has gained increasing attention for its role in promoting local identity, sustainable practices, and rural development. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, the study combines field observations, stakeholder interviews, and analysis of existing tourism and gastronomy literature. The results show that including gastronomic assets into structured thematic routes substantially contributes to destination differentiation and competitiveness, and that Mrizi i Zanave functions as a driver of local food system development, encouraging the amalgamation of nearby farms, artisanal producers, and heritage landmarks into an integrated tourism offering. The paper adds to the existing literature on gastronomic tourism by presenting empirical insights from an emerging Balkan destination and provides practical implications for policymakers and destination managers.

Keywords: culinary heritage, thematic routes, gastronomic tourism, local products, food system

1 Introduction

Culinary heritage has become an increasingly important component of cultural tourism and rural development strategies worldwide. As tourists increasingly seek authentic and meaningful experiences, culinary heritage has emerged as an important asset for destination differentiation and competitiveness [2], [4], [10], [13]. Food-related experiences allow visitors to interact directly with local culture, and destinations that successfully integrate culinary heritage into their tourism offerings can generate economic benefits while strengthening local identity [16]. The relationship between culinary heritage and tourism is particularly relevant in

rural areas, where local food systems remain closely linked to landscapes, agriculture, and community life, contributing to sustainable rural development [17].

One of the most prominent approaches linking gastronomy and tourism is the farm-to-table model, which emphasizes local sourcing, short supply chains, and direct producer–consumer connections, contributing to sustainable rural development [11]. In Albania, gastronomic tourism has grown significantly over the last decade. Among the most notable examples is Mrizi i Zanave, an agro-tourism enterprise located in the village of Fishtë, which through its farm-to-table philosophy and collaboration with local farmers has become a leading example of how culinary heritage can be transformed into a tourism development resource.

This study aims to explore the role of culinary heritage in supporting rural tourism development through the case of Mrizi i Zanave in Fishtë, Albania, addressing three research questions: (RQ1) How is culinary heritage integrated into the tourism experience at Mrizi i Zanave? (RQ2) How does culinary heritage contribute to destination attractiveness and visitor experiences? (RQ3) What role does the Mrizi i Zanave model play in aiding sustainable rural development?

2 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, selected because it allows an in-depth examination of complex social, cultural, and economic phenomena inside their real-life context [18]. The study was conducted in the village of Fishtë, municipality of Lezhë, northern Albania, home to Mrizi i Zanave, an agro-tourism enterprise founded by the Prenga family that attracts approximately 60,000 visitors annually. Data were collected between May and July 2025 through direct field observations, ten semi-structured interviews (three representatives of Mrizi i Zanave, three local producers, two tourism operators, and two community members, selected through purposive sampling), and analysis of organizational and tourism-related documents. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the stages proposed by Ahmed et al. [1]: data familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, and interpretation. The resulting themes focused on culinary heritage preservation, local food systems, tourism experiences, community development, and destination sustainability.

3 Findings and Discussion

3.1 Culinary Heritage and Destination Identity

Gastronomy, nature, agriculture, and livestock are strong pillars of Fishtë's tourism development. The tourism and wine sector built around Mrizi i Zanave is structured around a comprehensive ecosystem combining agricultural production, gastronomic experiences, accommodation, and complementary activities, organized into four interconnected components: agriculture and regional products (bird farm, cheese tunnel, Kallmet vine cultivation, "Uncle Ndue" honeybees, dairy production, eco-friendly milling), gastronomic products (food and wine stores, shops with typical products, farm animal interactions), accommodation (hotel, agro-camping, Mrizi i Zanave inns), and complementary activities (entertainment, agricultural walking tours, cultural events). Local food, supported by local agriculture, is a key driver for tourism development [14].

3.2 Farm-to-Table and Local Food Systems

The Mrizi i Zanave model represents a closed-cycle farm in which roughly 90% of products originate from the region. The enterprise maintains collaborative partnerships with approximately 400 small-scale farmers, supplying wild herbs, wild pomegranates, milk, and other traditional agricultural goods. Such networks strengthen short supply chains, territorial identity, and the socio-economic development of rural communities, and create market opportunities for local producers [12].

3.3 Cultural Heritage and Visitor Experiences

Fishtë is known for its biodiversity, local food products, ethnography, and ceramic processing. Gastronomy is a means of expressing local culture and functions as a "gray zone" medium of cultural tourism [6], [9]. Another important attraction is the house of the writer and patriot Gjergj Fishta, a declared cultural monument. Beyond gastronomy, this literary and cultural heritage reinforces the connections between tourism, culture, and local identity, positioning food as a core element of the visitor experience and a strategic link between tourism and agriculture.

Conclusions

This study highlights the strategic role of culinary heritage and farm-to-table tourism in shaping the emerging rural destination of Mrizi i Zanave in Fishtë. The findings show that gastronomy functions as both a cultural and economic driver,

that thematic routes and gastronomic itineraries support endogenous development and resilience by mobilizing local resources and extending tourist stays, and that the farm-to-table model and cooperative networks with over 400 small-scale producers illustrate how rural economies can benefit from tourism while preserving traditional practices and cultural identity. Integrating gastronomic tourism with cultural and literary attractions further diversifies the destination's offering. For policymakers and destination managers, the findings support coordinated, community-based approaches that leverage local food systems and cultural heritage to foster sustainable economic growth. This study is based on a single case study and a limited number of stakeholders; future research could compare multiple agritourism destinations and incorporate visitor perspectives.

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