CULINARY TRAIL:

DYNAMICS OF ENDANGERED CULINARY HERITAGE IN THE DANUBE REGION: SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND POLICY PERSPECTIVES





Editors:
Janja Lozar, Jasmina Jakomin

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Gregorčičeva 19, 5000 Nova Gorica, Slovenia

zalozba@fuds.si

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PREFACE

Janja Lozar[1]
School of Advanced Social Studies in Nova Gorica

This publication is the result of more than two years of dedicated work by people who, as partners in the Culinary Trail project, contributed to a common effort across the countries of the Danube Region. Each partner added a piece to the mosaic: knowledge from their own country, engagement with communities, research, discussions with stakeholders, and their own perspective on how culinary heritage can be understood, protected and sustained.

Perhaps the greatest attribute of the Danube Region is its diversity. Its history has created an extraordinary richness of cultures, ethnic communities, traditions and, consequently, culinary heritage. Over centuries of political and territorial change, borders shifted while people, memories and traditions remained. Communities that had once been part of a larger ethnic territory sometimes found themselves separated from it by newly drawn political borders. In this way, many ethnic minority communities became distinct cultural islands within different states. These communities preserved their language, customs, traditions and ways of life. They also preserved their food.

Culinary heritage is much more than a collection of recipes or traditional dishes. Food carries memory, knowledge and identity. The way food is prepared, the ingredients that are used, the occasions on which particular dishes are served, and the knowledge passed from one generation to another tell us something about a community and its history. For minority communities in particular, these traditions are an important link between generations and a way of maintaining a distinct identity within the wider society.

Today, many of these traditions are under pressure. Demographic change, migration, economic restructuring, globalisation and changing lifestyles affect the ways in which culinary knowledge has traditionally been passed on. When communities become smaller, younger generations leave, local economic structures disappear, or knowledge is no longer transmitted within families, culinary heritage can gradually disappear as well.

During our work, we repeatedly came back to one important question: how can we preserve this heritage without separating it from the everyday life of the communities that created it?

This question shaped our research from the beginning. The research was undertaken not only to understand the conditions affecting minority culinary heritage across the Danube Region, but also to provide the evidence and knowledge needed to develop the Strategy for its protection and promotion. The work was carried out across 13 countries in the Danube Region and adapted the CRIPREDE methodological framework to a transnational research context. But methodology alone could not give us the answers we were looking for. The process depended on many people: researchers, community representatives, policymakers, experts, project partners and other stakeholders who contributed their knowledge, experience, criticism and time. This experience

[1] janja.lozar@fuds.si.
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confirmed something that may sound simple but is fundamental: a strategy for protecting living heritage cannot be built only at a desk.

The people who carry that heritage must be part of the process. Researchers are needed to understand and document it. Policymakers and public institutions are needed to create supportive frameworks. Local and regional actors are needed to turn ideas into practice. Economic actors can help create conditions in which traditions remain viable. Without these connections, even a well-written strategy risks remaining only a document.

Bringing these different perspectives together was not always simple. The Danube Region is diverse not only in its heritage, but also in its demographic realities, institutional structures and economic conditions. A solution that works in one place cannot simply be transferred to another. Considerable time and effort were therefore invested in understanding these differences, comparing experiences, questioning assumptions and finding common ground.

After more than two years of this work, I believe we have succeeded in developing a strategy that is realistic, implementable and, importantly, grounded in the evidence we collected and the realities we encountered across the Danube Region. I say this not because every question has been answered, but because the strategy was built through research, discussion and the direct involvement of people who understand these issues from very different perspectives.

Its vision expresses what we ultimately want to achieve: to establish the Danube Region as a global leader in celebrating and sustaining its diverse culinary heritage, fostering unity, pride and prosperity across communities.

This publication brings together the theoretical, empirical and practical dimensions of the work that supported the development of the Strategy. It considers culinary heritage as a social field shaped by communities, institutions and economic realities; examines resilience, transmission, resourcefulness and the possibilities and risks of economic valorisation; and follows these findings into participatory strategy development and the question of long-term sustainability. In this sense, the publication presents not only the results of our research, but also an approach that can be questioned, adapted and further developed in future research on endangered culinary heritage and other forms of intangible cultural heritage.

This publication is particularly addressed to higher education institutions and the scientific community. I hope it will encourage further research, critical discussion and knowledge exchange across disciplines, countries and communities. I also hope that others will build on what has been started here: testing the methodology, challenging our findings, applying the approach in different contexts and developing new answers to the questions we have raised.

The work of the many people from 13 countries who contributed to this process deserves to continue beyond the lifetime of one project and beyond the pages of one publication.

Culinary heritage will not survive simply because we document it. It survives when somebody still knows how to prepare a dish and why it is prepared in a particular way; when knowledge passes from one generation to the next; when communities continue to recognise it as their own; and when social and economic conditions allow these practices to remain part of everyday life.

For me, this is where preservation and development meet. If culinary heritage remains alive within its community while also creating opportunities, visibility and value for the people who carry it, we are not simply preserving something from the past. We are giving it a place in the future. That is what we have tried to achieve through the Culinary Trail project, and what I hope this publication will help to carry forward.

INTRODUCTION

Tamara Besednjak Valič[2]
Rudolfovo – Science and Technology Centre Novo mesto, Faculty of Information Studies in Novo mesto

Food has always represented far more than a means of subsistence. Across societies and historical periods, culinary traditions have embodied collective memory, social relationships, cultural identity, local knowledge, and adaptive responses to environmental and economic change. Traditional recipes, preparation techniques, seasonal practices, and rituals surrounding food are among the most enduring expressions of intangible cultural heritage, reflecting centuries of interaction between communities, landscapes, institutions, and everyday life. At the same time, culinary heritage is increasingly recognised as a strategic development resource capable of supporting sustainable tourism, regional competitiveness, local entrepreneurship, social cohesion, and cross-border cooperation. This monograph, alongside the results of the *Culinary Trail of the Ethnic and Local Cuisine in the Danube Region (Culinary Trail)* project, argues that culinary heritage should no longer be understood primarily as an object of preservation, but as an evolving system of regional transformation, where culture, governance, innovation, sustainability and economic development intersect.

Over the past three decades, the understanding of cultural heritage has undergone a profound conceptual transformation. What was once regarded primarily as the preservation of monuments, historic buildings and archaeological sites is now increasingly recognised as a dynamic process through which societies preserve cultural heritage while allowing it to evolve. Within those processes, societies negotiate identity, transmit knowledge, and create social, cultural and economic value. This shift has been particularly evident in the growing recognition of intangible cultural heritage. The emphasis is not placed solely on physical artefacts, but also on living practices, knowledge systems and cultural expressions. All of this is maintained and continuously recreated by communities. A major turning point was reached by the adoption of UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO 2024). The convention itself defined intangible cultural heritage as the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills that communities recognise as part of their cultural heritage. Importantly, the Convention departed from traditional preservation-centred approaches. The convention recognises heritage as a living process that is continuously recreated in response to communities' interactions with their environment, history and changing social conditions. Heritage is therefore understood as an evolving cultural resource. As such, it contributes to identity, continuity and creativity. European policy has increasingly embraced this broader understanding of heritage. The *European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage* (European Commission 2019) positions cultural heritage as a strategic asset for supporting social cohesion, sustainable development, regional competitiveness and territorial attractiveness. Within this, culinary heritage is no longer understood merely as a subset of gastronomy or tourism. Rather, it represents a multidimensional policy domain situated at the intersection of cultural identity,

[2] tamara.valic@rudolfovo.eu
@Besednjak Valič. This is an open-access chapter distributed under the Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND license which enables reusers to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, for noncommercial purposes only, and only if attribution is given to the creator.

sustainability, governance, and regional development. Such a broader understanding provides the conceptual foundation for the present volume.

Academic literature has traditionally examined culinary heritage primarily through the lenses of gastronomic tourism, destination branding and visitor experiences (Richards 2015; Ellis et al. 2018). These perspectives have significantly advanced the understanding of food tourism but have also, at times, understated the broader developmental functions of culinary heritage.

Food systems simultaneously operate across different dimensions. These include cultural, social, environmental, economic and institutional dimensions. Traditional food practices operate on many levels, contributing to the preservation of local ecological knowledge, biodiversity, social cohesion, intergenerational knowledge transfer, entrepreneurship and territorial identities. Consequently, culinary heritage should be understood as a complex socio-economic system embedded within regional development processes. Scholarship increasingly supports this broader perspective. Sustainable tourism research emphasises that local gastronomy contributes to destination resilience, supports short supply chains, strengthens community participation and enhances place-based development (Hall and Gössling 2016; Everett and Slocum 2013). In parallel, circular economy and sustainability literature recognises traditional food systems as repositories of resource-efficient practices, frugal innovation and low-waste production models, all relevant for contemporary sustainability transitions (Geissdoerfer et al. 2017). From a sociological perspective, culinary heritage also constitutes a field of social interaction in which multiple actors negotiate meanings, legitimacy and authority. Different stakeholders, including public institutions, local communities, tourism organisations, researchers, entrepreneurs, producers and civil society organisations continuously shape culinary traditions. These stakeholders influence how traditions are interpreted, institutionalised and commercialised. Such processes extend well beyond tourism and require analytical perspectives. Such perspectives help to explain how cultural heritage and traditions contribute to integrating governance, institutional change, innovation and regional development.

The Danube Region represents one of Europe's most complex macro-regional territories (Besednjak Valič 2019). Spanning fourteen countries and encompassing remarkable cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity, the Danube Region has historically functioned as a space of exchange, migration and coexistence. Its culinary traditions reflect centuries of interaction among different communities, political systems, religious traditions and geographical environments. At the same time, the region faces a number of shared structural challenges. These include rural depopulation, demographic ageing, economic disparities, uneven territorial development, but also climate change and increasing globalisation. All listed threaten the long-term viability of local food systems and traditional knowledge. Many culinary traditions remain poorly documented, fragmented across administrative borders or insufficiently integrated into regional development strategies (EUSDR 2022). These characteristics make the Danube Region particularly suitable for examining heritage-based development. For these reasons, the Danube macro-region provides an opportunity to investigate how cultural heritage operates within multi-level governance systems involving European, national, regional and local governance systems and institutions. It also offers an opportunity to further examine and understand how heritage contributes to cross-border cooperation and sustainable regional development.

The European Union's Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) explicitly recognises culture, tourism, innovation and institutional cooperation as mutually reinforcing dimensions of macro-regional development (EUSDR 2022). The *Culinary Trail* project builds directly upon these policy priorities by bringing together partners from across the macro-region to develop integrated

approaches for safeguarding, valorising and sustainably utilising ethnic and local culinary heritage ("Culinary Trail" 2024). Through its emphasis on transnational cooperation, digitalisation, capacity building, governance innovation and sustainable tourism, the project illustrates how culinary heritage can contribute to broader processes of regional transformation. For this reason, the Danube Region should be understood not merely as the geographical setting of this volume but as a living laboratory in which contemporary approaches to heritage governance, regional development and sustainability are observed, critically analysed and systematically upgraded. The *Culinary Trail* project was implemented under the Interreg Danube Region Programme between 2024 and 2026. The project seeks to document, promote and safeguard the culinary heritage of thirty-five ethnic communities across the Danube macro-region. Beyond preserving recipes and traditional food practices, the project aims to strengthen regional cooperation. It supports slow culinary tourism, encourages short value chains, fosters social and frugal innovation, and develops common governance mechanisms capable of ensuring the long-term sustainability of culinary heritage. The principal outputs of Culinary Trail include a transnational digital catalogue of culinary heritage, a joint strategy for the protection and promotion of ethnic and local cuisine, thirty-three transnational action plans, a joint innovation and policy platform, new business models for slow culinary tourism, demonstration and training centres, and pilot initiatives designed to transform culinary heritage into an engine of sustainable regional development.

The present edited volume constitutes one of the scientific outcomes emerging from this broader collaborative initiative. Rather than documenting project implementation, the edited volume seeks to provide conceptual and analytical perspectives that contribute to the growing academic discussion on culinary heritage as a multidimensional phenomenon situated at the intersection of culture, governance, sustainability, regional development, innovation, and social transformation. The contributing authors approach culinary heritage from different yet complementary disciplinary perspectives. These demonstrate that gastronomy can no longer be understood solely as a cultural tradition or tourism attraction. Instead, culinary heritage should be interpreted as a complex socio-economic system where diverse actors negotiate cultural meanings, institutional arrangements, economic opportunities, environmental responsibilities, and developmental priorities.

The central premise running throughout this edited volume is that culinary heritage evolves through continuous interaction between communities, institutions, markets, public policies, and changing societal expectations. Traditional knowledge is not only constantly reinterpreted and adapted, but also commercialised, institutionalised, and transmitted across generations. Understanding these transformation processes requires analytical frameworks capable of integrating different perspectives. Having said all this, the chapters collected in this volume examine culinary heritage through several interconnected lenses, each highlighting a different dimension of this broader transformation. The opening chapter by Besednjak Valič conceptualises culinary heritage as a strategic social field in which cultural, institutional, economic, and civic actors negotiate legitimacy, identity, governance arrangements, and regional development trajectories. Building upon different theories, the chapter positions gastronomy as a mechanism of regional transformation rather than merely an object of cultural preservation. The second chapter by Džajić Uršič examines frugality and resourcefulness as historically embedded principles of traditional culinary systems. Drawing on circular economy theory, frugal innovation, and cultural resilience, the chapter demonstrates how practices developed under conditions of scarcity offer valuable insights for contemporary sustainability transitions and responsible tourism development. The third and fourth chapters focus on the Gagauz community in the Republic of Moldova, exploring complementary aspects of cultural resilience and economic valorisation. The third chapter by

Căpățînă, Dilan and Afanasie, analyses the social systems responsible for transmitting culinary knowledge across generations, while the fourth chapter by Căpățînă, investigates how culinary heritage can generate locally embedded economic value through community-based tourism, entrepreneurship, and sustainable regional development. The fifth chapter by Lozar shifts attention towards governance processes. It presents the participatory methodology used to develop the transnational Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Minority Culinary Heritage in the Danube Region. The chapter demonstrates how collaborative governance, stakeholder participation, and strategic co-creation can support the long-term safeguarding and sustainable development of minority culinary traditions. The final chapter by Marin, Boanță and Boanță, integrates the practical experiences of the project into a comprehensive sustainability framework. It clusters project outputs into an operational system of sustainability tools and proposes a governance model capable of supporting the continuation, adaptation, and long-term impact of culinary heritage initiatives.

Although each chapter addresses a distinct research problem, together they reveal a coherent narrative. Culinary heritage emerges as a dynamic resource through which communities respond to contemporary societal challenges. The authors believe this edited volume will contribute to both academic debates and the work of policymakers and other stakeholders who are engaged in preserving and developing Europe's rich culinary heritage.

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CULINARY HERITAGE AS A STRATEGIC SOCIAL FIELD: GOVERNANCE, INNOVATION AND REGIONAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE DANUBE REGION

Tamara Besednjak Valič[3]
Rudolfovo – Science and Technology Centre Novo mesto, Faculty of Information Studies in Novo mesto

Abstract

Culinary heritage is increasingly recognised as a cultural, social and economic resource within regional development. This chapter conceptualises culinary heritage as a dynamic social field in which cultural, economic and institutional actors negotiate legitimacy, identity, symbolic value and developmental priorities. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of social fields, Fligstein and McAdam's concept of strategic action fields, and literature on regional innovation systems and governance networks, the chapter develops an interdisciplinary framework for understanding gastronomy as part of regional transformation. The focus is placed on the Danube Region, a culturally diverse macro-region shaped by historical complexity, transnational interactions and uneven development trajectories. The chapter argues that culinary heritage extends beyond the preservation of traditional food practices and functions as a mechanism of cultural production, governance coordination and regional innovation. Culinary heritage ecosystems depend on collaboration among public institutions, local communities, tourism organisations, cultural associations and market actors. Innovation in these ecosystems emerges through knowledge exchange, reinterpretation of traditions and mobilisation of symbolic and place-based resources. The chapter also identifies challenges linked to organisational fragmentation, governance lock-in and uneven institutional support. It concludes that culinary heritage should be understood as an evolving and contested social field contributing to cultural resilience, regional identity formation and socio-economic development.

Keywords: culinary heritage; social fields; governance networks; regional innovation systems; Danube Region.

Introduction

Culinary heritage has increasingly emerged as an important dimension of contemporary discussions on culture, regional development, tourism, sustainability and identity construction. Within such discussions, food practices are no longer understood merely as elements of everyday consumption or inherited local traditions, but rather as socially embedded cultural expressions through which communities communicate memory, belonging and collective identity (Tibère 2016). Culinary heritage therefore represents a dynamic social phenomenon situated at the intersection of cultural traditions, economic activities, institutional governance and innovation processes. At the same time, gastronomy has progressively become recognised as an intangible cultural asset. Furthermore, it is also seen as a developmental resource capable of contributing to

[3] tamara.valic@rudolfovo.eu
@Besednjak Valič. This is an open-access chapter distributed under the Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND license which enables reusers to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, for noncommercial purposes only, and only if attribution is given to the creator.

regional competitiveness, territorial branding and social cohesion, particularly within contemporary European regional policy frameworks (Duda 2024).

The growing institutionalisation of culinary heritage can be observed through a range of heritage preservation initiatives, regional gastronomy strategies and transnational cooperation frameworks. Simultaneously, international heritage organisations increasingly emphasise that heritage itself should not be interpreted as a static repository of traditions, but rather as a socially constructed and continuously negotiated field shaped by multiple actors, interests and power relations (Smith 2022). In this context, Matta (2016) argues that food heritage is actively produced through processes of legitimisation, institutional recognition and symbolic valuation, rather than simply inherited unchanged from the past. Such perspectives move beyond simple understandings of tradition and rather position culinary heritage within broader discussions on governance, cultural capital and socio-economic transformation.

Within the Danube Region, these dynamics become particularly significant due to the region's historical complexity, cultural diversity and multilayered socio-political development (EU Strategy for the Danube Region Action Plan 2020). The region represents a space characterised by overlapping historical trajectories, post-socialist transformations, ethnic plurality and uneven regional development patterns (Besednjak Valič et al. 2023). Culinary traditions in this context frequently transcend contemporary national borders and reflect centuries of migration, cultural exchange and coexistence. At the same time, processes of globalisation, demographic change, tourism expansion and economic restructuring increasingly challenge the continuity of local gastronomic knowledge and practices, particularly within smaller and minority communities.

Such developments position culinary heritage as an important analytical lens through which broader questions of regional transformation may be examined. Existing research on regional innovation systems and cultural and creative industries has already demonstrated that development processes are strongly shaped by relational networks, institutional capacities and forms of social coordination rather than solely by economic resources or technological advancement (B.-Å. Lundvall and Borrás 2005; Besednjak Valič 2022). Similarly, studies of local food networks highlight the importance of stakeholder cooperation, adaptive governance and knowledge exchange in sustaining regional gastronomic ecosystems (Halkier and James 2022). Culinary heritage therefore increasingly operates not only as a means of cultural expression, but also as a field in which different stakeholders negotiate symbolic and economic value and power.

This chapter approaches culinary heritage through the theoretical perspective of social fields, drawing primarily on Bourdieu's conceptualisation of fields as relational social spaces structured by forms of capital, institutional positioning and struggles over legitimacy (Bourdieu 1986). From this perspective, culinary heritage is understood not as a fixed cultural category, but as a socially negotiated arena in which cultural, economic and institutional actors interact, cooperate and compete in shaping the meanings, uses and developmental potentials of gastronomy. Such an approach makes it possible to understand culinary heritage simultaneously as a cultural practice, governance mechanism, innovation resource and regional development instrument.

The chapter therefore addresses the following research question:

How does culinary heritage function as a strategic action field contributing to regional development in the Danube macro-region?

The chapter develops a conceptually oriented discussion connecting scholarship on cultural heritage, governance, regional innovation systems and social field theory. In doing so, it contributes

to emerging interdisciplinary discussions on the role of culinary heritage within contemporary regional development processes and broader socio-cultural transformations in the Danube Region.

Culinary Heritage as a Social Field

Cultural Capital, Legitimacy and Culinary Heritage

Culinary heritage is not to be understood simply as a collection of traditional recipes, regional products or inherited gastronomic practices. Rather, it is a socially constructed field in which meanings, legitimacy and cultural value are continuously negotiated (Shahrin and Hussin 2023). Such an understanding moves beyond essentialist interpretations of heritage as a stable inheritance from the past and instead conceptualises gastronomy as a relational and dynamic social domain shaped by interactions among multiple actors, institutions and forms of capital. Culinary heritage therefore emerges not as a fixed cultural category, but as a process through which social actors attribute symbolic, cultural and economic value to particular food-related practices, narratives and identities (Matta 2016).

This perspective is strongly grounded in Bourdieu's theory of social fields. Bourdieu conceptualises fields as structured social arenas in which actors occupy different positions according to their possession of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986, 243–48). Fields simultaneously operate as spaces of cooperation and struggle. Within the fields, actors compete over legitimacy, authority and the power to define socially recognised forms of value. Cultural practices are therefore never neutral or naturally legitimised, but become socially recognised through institutional processes of classification, distinction and symbolic validation.

Applied to gastronomy, such a perspective suggests that culinary heritage is not inherently valuable solely because of historical continuity or cultural longevity. Rather, culinary traditions become recognised as "heritage" when actors possessing institutional and symbolic authority successfully legitimise particular practices, products or narratives as culturally significant. The main actors in the field include stakeholders, such as public institutions, tourism organisations, chefs, researchers, cultural associations, local communities and policy actors, all participate in defining which culinary practices are considered authentic, representative or worthy of preservation. Culinary heritage thus becomes a field structured by unequal access to symbolic resources, institutional recognition and cultural visibility.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is particularly relevant in this context. Culinary knowledge, gastronomic competences and familiarity with regional food cultures function as forms of embodied cultural capital through which social distinction and collective identity are reproduced (Bourdieu 1986, 243–48). At the same time, culinary heritage may also generate symbolic capital by associating regions, communities or products with authenticity, tradition and cultural prestige. Regional cuisines therefore become mechanisms through which territories symbolically position themselves within broader cultural and economic fields.

The relationship between gastronomy and symbolic distinction has become increasingly visible within contemporary heritage economies. Culinary traditions are frequently mobilised within tourism strategies (Zurbitu-Aldama et al. 2025), destination branding initiatives and regional development policies as markers of uniqueness and territorial identity. Bell and Valentine argue

that food practices are deeply connected to spatial belonging and social identity, emphasising that communities "*think place and identity through food*" (Bell and Valentine 1997, 3). Food therefore operates not only as material consumption, but as a symbolic system through which individuals and communities negotiate belonging, memory and territorial attachment.

The institutionalisation of culinary heritage further reflects broader processes of symbolic legitimisation. Smith argues that heritage should not be approached as an objective cultural entity, but rather as a cultural process shaped through institutional practices of recognition, representation and interpretation (Smith 2006, 11–14). Heritage, in this perspective, is produced through what Smith defines as the "*authorised heritage discourse*," whereby dominant institutional actors define legitimate understandings of authenticity, value and collective memory (Smith 2006, 29–34). Such observations are highly relevant for gastronomy because culinary traditions become recognised as heritage not solely through historical continuity, but through institutional validation and symbolic recognition.

Similarly, Kuutma conceptualises heritage as a mode of cultural production shaped by political, economic and institutional processes rather than as a naturally existing cultural category (Kuutma 2009, 6–9). Processes of heritagisation therefore involve the active transformation of cultural practices into institutionalised and socially recognised forms of heritage. In the context of gastronomy, such transformations frequently occur through culinary festivals, heritage labelling, tourism promotion, museumisation, UNESCO recognition frameworks and regional branding strategies.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett further develops this argument by conceptualising heritage as "*metacultural production*". Heritage is actively produced through systems of representation, valorisation and institutional framing and is not simply inherited from the past (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004, 52–54). Culinary heritage therefore emerges as a socially mediated and strategically organised field in which authenticity, locality and tradition are continuously interpreted, negotiated and reproduced through institutional and symbolic practices. From this perspective, cultural heritage is understood as a social field.

From this perspective, gastronomy is not merely concerned with preserving traditions, but with negotiating cultural legitimacy and symbolic power. Culinary practices become embedded within broader struggles over representation, territorial visibility and economic value, while heritage itself emerges not as a fixed cultural essence, but as a relational and contested social process shaped by institutional authority, cultural capital and symbolic distinction.

Strategic Action Fields and Governance Networks

Bourdieu's theory therefore provides an essential framework for understanding the relational and symbolic dimensions of culinary heritage. It is the dynamics of governance, institutional coordination and collective action that can be further developed through the perspective of strategic action fields proposed by Fligstein and McAdam. Their approach extends field theory by focusing more explicitly on how actors construct social order, stabilise institutional arrangements and negotiate power relations within complex governance environments.

Fligstein and McAdam define strategic action fields as socially constructed meso-level orders in which actors possessing varying degrees of power interact under shared understandings regarding the purposes, rules and legitimate forms of action within a given field (Fligstein and McAdam 2011,

3–5). Fields are therefore not static structures but continuously evolving arenas of strategic interaction. Fields are shaped by cooperation, conflict and institutional negotiation. Social order within fields depends upon the ability of actors to create shared meanings, mobilise coalitions and maintain legitimacy.

Such a framework is particularly useful for understanding culinary heritage because gastronomy increasingly operates through complex governance networks involving public institutions, local communities, tourism organisations, cultural associations, development agencies, researchers and market actors. Culinary heritage initiatives rarely emerge spontaneously. Rather, they are actively organised through strategic cooperation, institutional coordination and network-building processes.

Fligstein and McAdam further emphasise the importance of "*social skill*," referring to the capacity of actors to induce cooperation, construct collective identities and stabilise social relationships within fields (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 7–9). In the context of culinary heritage, social skill becomes visible in the ability of actors to mobilise local traditions into broader governance frameworks, tourism initiatives or regional development strategies. Cases of regional branding campaigns, food festivals, heritage preservation programmes and transnational cultural initiatives all depend heavily on the strategic coordination of heterogeneous actors with differing interests and resources.

The distinction between incumbents and challengers within strategic action fields is also analytically significant. "*Incumbents*" are actors occupying dominant positions within the field who possess disproportionate influence over governance structures and institutional norms, while "*challengers*" seek alternative forms of recognition and legitimacy (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 5–6). Within culinary heritage systems, dominant actors, namely incumbents, may include state institutions, tourism authorities or large commercial actors capable of defining mainstream representations of regional gastronomy. Conversely, minority communities, small-scale producers or local associations may occupy more marginal positions while simultaneously attempting to gain visibility and legitimacy within broader heritage frameworks. In this context, these groups act as challengers.

These dynamics are particularly relevant in the Danube Region, where culinary heritage reflects centuries of intercultural exchange, shifting borders and ethnic plurality. The region represents a highly complex transnational, sometimes even transregional, field characterised by overlapping governance structures, uneven institutional capacities and multilayered identities. Culinary traditions frequently transcend national borders and cannot be adequately understood within isolated state-centred frameworks. Instead, gastronomy functions as a relational cultural system shaped by transnational interaction, mobility and historical interconnectedness.

The European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (2010) further illustrates the importance of governance coordination and strategic field construction within the macro-region. The EUSDR conceptualises the Danube Region as a space of transnational cooperation aimed at strengthening territorial cohesion, institutional coordination and cross-border development. Within such frameworks, culinary heritage increasingly functions not only as a cultural expression, but also as a mechanism of symbolic integration and regional cooperation.

At the same time, governance scholarship highlights that contemporary regional development increasingly depends on networks, institutional learning and collaborative coordination. For a deeper understanding, relying on hierarchical state structures providing centralised control is not sufficient. Rhodes argues that governance operates through interdependent policy networks

connecting public institutions, private actors and civil society organisations (Rhodes 2007, 1246–49). Jessop similarly emphasises the growing importance of heterarchical governance arrangements in contemporary development processes, where coordination emerges through negotiation, partnership and distributed institutional interaction rather than centralised control (Jessop 2013, 32–36).

Such perspectives are highly relevant for culinary heritage governance because gastronomic systems depend strongly on collaboration among producers, municipalities, tourism organisations, cultural institutions and local communities. Culinary heritage initiatives therefore function most effectively when embedded within broader governance ecosystems capable of coordinating cultural preservation, economic development and social participation.

Understanding culinary heritage through the combined perspectives of social fields and strategic action fields consequently enables a more comprehensive interpretation of gastronomy within contemporary regional transformation processes. Culinary heritage emerges not as a static cultural object, but as a dynamic and contested field in which actors negotiate legitimacy, identity, governance and developmental priorities. Such an approach also allows gastronomy to be understood as an important mechanism through which regions construct symbolic visibility, organise cooperation and shape future developmental trajectories.

Governance Networks and Regional Innovation Ecosystems in the Danube Region

Regional Innovation Systems and Culinary Heritage

Contemporary regional development theories increasingly conceptualise innovation not as a linear technological process but as a socially embedded and institutionally mediated process of interactive learning among heterogeneous actors (Cooke et al. 1997; B. T. Asheim and Coenen 2005). Within this perspective, regions are understood not as passive territorial containers of economic activity but as relational systems in which firms, institutions, governance bodies, research organisations and communities collectively shape innovation capacities and developmental trajectories. The concept of Regional Innovation Systems (RIS), developed primarily by Cooke, Lundvall, Morgan and Asheim, provides a particularly useful analytical framework for understanding how culinary heritage functions within broader regional transformation processes.

The RIS approach emerged as a critique of narrow technology-centred innovation models and instead conceptualised innovation as dependent upon institutional interaction, collective learning and governance coordination. Cooke defines regional innovation systems as institutional environments connecting firms, governance actors, research infrastructures and intermediary organisations through processes of interactive learning and knowledge exchange (Cooke 1992, 367–70). Innovation, from this perspective, is not limited to scientific discovery or technological advancement. Rather, it includes broader processes of organisational adaptation, social learning and knowledge circulation.

Similarly, Lundvall emphasises that innovation emerges through interactive learning embedded within social and institutional contexts. Innovation does not emerge through isolated market competition alone (Lundvall 2007, 2–5). Morgan further develops this perspective through the concept of "*learning regions*". Regional competitiveness increasingly depends upon institutional

cooperation, knowledge exchange and collective learning capacities (Morgan 1997, 493–96). Such approaches are especially relevant for culinary heritage because gastronomy relies heavily upon tacit knowledge, intergenerational transmission, local cultural competences and socially embedded forms of learning.

Within the Danube Region, culinary heritage cannot be reduced to a collection of recipes, products or folklorised traditions. Rather, gastronomy represents a complex socio-cultural ecosystem in which symbolic meanings, economic interests, territorial identities and institutional strategies intersect. Culinary heritage simultaneously functions as cultural memory, economic resource, tourism asset and mechanism of social cohesion. UNESCO's understanding of intangible cultural heritage explicitly recognises culinary practices as living cultural systems sustained through collective creativity, social reproduction and intergenerational continuity.

The concept of culinary heritage as a regional innovation ecosystem becomes particularly productive when linked to Asheim's differentiated knowledge base approach. Asheim argues that innovation systems depend upon analytical, synthetic and symbolic forms of knowledge production (Asheim 2007; Asheim and Coenen 2005). Culinary heritage strongly depends upon symbolic and synthetic knowledge bases. Symbolic knowledge relates to meanings, narratives, aesthetics, cultural representation and identity formation, while synthetic knowledge refers to tacit competences, practical know-how and embodied craft traditions embedded within everyday social practices. Culinary heritage systems are shaped by complex interactions among food, territory, tourism, branding, and local actors, and innovation in these systems often arises through collaboration and the development of region-specific knowledge (Cavicchi and Ciampi Stancova 2016). Culinary heritage systems involve highly complex forms of tacit, experiential and symbolic knowledge production. Innovation within such systems often emerges not through radical technological breakthroughs but through reinterpretation of traditions, hybridisation of cultural influences, adaptation to contemporary tourism markets and recombination of local knowledge within transnational networks.

Hall and Gössling similarly emphasise that food systems increasingly contribute to regional development through networking, clustering and the strengthening of local supply chains (Hall and Gössling 2016, 1–5). Culinary heritage therefore functions not merely as a symbolic representation of the past but as an active component of contemporary regional innovation ecosystems.

Governance Networks and Multi-Level Coordination

Culinary heritage ecosystems are deeply embedded within broader governance structures and multi-level coordination processes (Candel and Pereira 2017). Governance in this context refers to both formal state administration and to negotiated coordination among interdependent actors operating across multiple institutional scales. Contemporary governance scholarship increasingly emphasises that regional development depends upon collaborative interaction between public institutions, civil society organisations, private actors and transnational policy frameworks.

Bob Jessop conceptualises governance as the coordination of interdependent activities through heterarchical forms of organisation, negotiation and self-organisation (Jessop 2013, 32–36). Rhodes similarly argues that governance increasingly operates through policy networks linking state institutions, private organisations and civil society actors within complex systems of interdependence (Rhodes 2007, 1246–49). Both authors understand governance as extending beyond purely hierarchical state control. Such approaches are particularly relevant for culinary

heritage because gastronomic systems depend heavily upon cooperation among municipalities, tourism boards, cultural institutions, NGOs, producers, educational organisations and local communities.

Fligstein and McAdam's theory of strategic action fields, discussed earlier, further deepens this understanding by conceptualising governance arenas as socially constructed meso-level orders where actors negotiate shared meanings, institutional rules and forms of legitimate action (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 3–5).

Regional Fragmentation, Lock-In and Developmental Constraints

Despite the developmental potential of culinary heritage ecosystems, regional innovation literature also emphasises the structural limitations and tensions affecting governance systems. Territorial embeddedness alone does not automatically generate innovation, cooperation or resilience. Boschma's critical reassessment of proximity theory is particularly relevant in this regard. Boschma argues that geographical proximity itself is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for innovation (Boschma 2005, 63–67). Instead, innovation depends upon the interaction between cognitive, institutional, organisational, social and geographical forms of proximity.

This insight is highly applicable to culinary heritage in the Danube Region. Shared geography or historical interconnectedness does not necessarily produce effective collaboration if institutional fragmentation, weak governance structures or cognitive distance prevent meaningful interaction between actors. Moreover, excessive embeddedness may itself generate "*lock-in*" effects that reduce adaptability and innovation capacities. Boschma warns that overly rigid institutional or cultural proximity can inhibit experimentation, openness and organisational learning (Boschma 2005, 68–71).

Within culinary heritage systems, such lock-in may emerge through rigid understandings of authenticity, folklorisation of minority traditions or essentialised representations of regional culture. Heritage practices risk becoming static performative displays oriented primarily toward tourism consumption rather than adaptive and socially embedded cultural systems. This tension between preservation and innovation represents one of the central governance challenges within contemporary heritage economies.

Tödtling and Trippl identify several structural deficiencies that commonly affect weaker regional innovation systems, including organisational thinness, fragmentation and lock-in (Tödtling and Trippl 2005, 1205–8). These categories provide an especially useful framework for understanding the challenges faced by many culinary heritage initiatives in the Danube Region. Organisational thinness refers to the absence of intermediary support institutions and development infrastructures capable of connecting cultural actors with broader innovation systems. Fragmentation emerges where tourism, agriculture, education, culture and regional development policies remain poorly coordinated.

Many minority and rural culinary initiatives within the Danube Region face precisely such constraints. Small-scale producers frequently lack access to professional marketing capacities, institutional support structures or transregional governance networks. Minority culinary traditions may remain symbolically recognised yet economically marginalised. At the same time, many cultural heritage projects depend upon short-term external funding cycles, limiting institutional continuity and long-term sustainability.

Consequently, the central challenge is not merely preservation of culinary heritage but the construction of resilient governance ecosystems capable of connecting local knowledge, institutional coordination and regional development strategies. Culinary heritage therefore functions simultaneously as a cultural resource, governance mechanism and developmental challenge within the broader transformation processes shaping the contemporary Danube Region.

Conclusion

Culinary heritage in the Danube Region represents far more than the preservation of traditional recipes, local products or symbolic expressions of regional culture. As this chapter has demonstrated, gastronomy functions as a multidimensional social field through which identity, memory, governance and regional development are continuously negotiated. Culinary practices simultaneously embody cultural continuity and social transformation, linking everyday food traditions with broader economic, institutional and territorial processes.

The discussion has shown that culinary heritage operates as an important mechanism of collective identity formation in culturally diverse and historically layered regions such as the Danube macro-region. Food practices preserve embodied cultural memory, sustain minority identities and reinforce symbolic attachments to place. At the same time, food practices also enable intercultural exchange across national and ethnic boundaries. In this sense, gastronomy contributes to both the preservation of local distinctiveness and the construction of transnational regional interconnectedness.

At the same time, culinary heritage has increasingly become integrated into contemporary regional development strategies. Processes of heritagisation, territorial branding and food tourism reposition gastronomy as a developmental resource capable of generating economic diversification, strengthening local networks and enhancing regional visibility. However, these processes are not neutral. They involve selective interpretations of heritage, institutional mediation and power relations that shape which traditions become valorised, commercialised or publicly represented. Culinary heritage therefore emerges not simply as a cultural asset, but as a contested arena of governance and symbolic production.

The chapter further highlighted the relevance of regional innovation and governance approaches for understanding the transformation of culinary systems. The Danube Region illustrates how gastronomy-related initiatives increasingly depend on collaborative governance structures, knowledge exchange networks and multi-level institutional coordination. Innovation within culinary heritage systems often takes the form of recombination and reinterpretation rather than technological disruption alone. Such innovation relies heavily on tacit, symbolic and place-based knowledge. In this context, regional development depends not only on economic competitiveness, but also on the capacity of actors to mobilise cultural resources through cooperation, institutional learning and social embeddedness.

Importantly, the Danube Region provides a particularly valuable analytical setting because of its historical plurality, geopolitical complexity and strong traditions of intercultural interaction. Culinary heritage within the region reflects centuries of migration, border shifts and cultural hybridisation, making gastronomy an especially visible expression of shared yet differentiated regional identities. Consequently, food heritage can contribute to social cohesion and regional

resilience precisely because it creates spaces where local specificity and transnational belonging coexist.

Future research should therefore move beyond narrowly sectoral or tourism-oriented understandings of gastronomy and examine culinary heritage as part of wider socio-spatial transformation processes. Greater attention is needed to the role of minority communities, informal knowledge networks, digital heritage practices and sustainability transitions within regional food systems. Equally important is the need to critically assess the tensions between cultural preservation, commodification and market-driven development in heritage governance frameworks.

Ultimately, culinary heritage in the Danube Region should be understood not as a static inheritance from the past, but as an evolving and relational process through which communities construct meaning, negotiate identity and shape regional futures. Gastronomy thus becomes both a reflection of social transformation and an active instrument in producing new forms of cultural, economic and territorial integration.

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FRUGALITY AND RESOURCEFULNESS IN CULINARY HERITAGE: CIRCULAR ECONOMY, RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABLE GASTRONOMY IN THE DANUBE REGION

Erika Džajić Uršič[4]
Rudolfovo – Science and Technology Centre Novo mesto, Faculty of Information Studies in Novo mesto

Abstract

Food practices have historically reflected how communities adapt to scarcity, environmental conditions, seasonal cycles, and social change. In many rural and ethnically diverse contexts, culinary traditions developed through everyday strategies of preservation, reuse, careful resource management, and creative adaptation to limited ingredients. This chapter examines frugality and resourcefulness in culinary heritage as socially embedded forms of circular practice. Drawing on theories of Circular Economy, frugal innovation, cultural resilience, and socio-cultural embeddedness, it explores how traditional cuisines of the Danube Region embody principles of reuse, preservation, waste reduction, local sourcing, and resource efficiency long before these became formal sustainability priorities. Rather than understanding frugality only as a condition of deprivation, the chapter conceptualises it as a form of adaptive cultural knowledge that connects material necessity with creativity, identity, and resilience. Using the *Culinary Trail of the Ethnic and Local Cuisine in the Danube Region* project as an illustrative framework, the chapter analyses how culinary heritage contributes to sustainable tourism, social innovation, regional identity, and local economic development. Particular attention is given to how frugal gastronomy can support short value chains, inclusive participation, and more sustainable food-related tourism practices. The chapter argues that traditional culinary resourcefulness should be understood not merely as a remnant of the past, but as a contemporary sustainability resource. In this sense, frugal gastronomy offers practical and conceptual insights for circular economy transitions, heritage preservation, and more resilient regional development in the Danube Region.

Keywords: frugal gastronomy; circular economy; culinary heritage; resourcefulness; cultural resilience; sustainable tourism; Danube Region; social innovation.

Introduction

Food practices have historically reflected the ways communities respond to scarcity, environmental conditions, and social change. In many parts of the Danube Region, culinary traditions developed through everyday strategies of preservation, reuse, and careful resource management long before sustainability became a formal policy objective. Within this context, the concept of the sustainable approach of Circular Economy has emerged as one of the most influential frameworks for rethinking production, consumption, and resource management (Geissdoerfer et al. 2017; Kirchherr et al. 2017). Unlike traditional linear economic systems based

[4] erika.ursic@fis.unm.si, erika.ursic@rudolfovo.eu
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on the “take–make–dispose” principle, circular approaches emphasise reuse, regeneration, waste reduction, and the continual circulation of resources within interconnected systems (Ghisellini et al. 2016).

Although discussions on the Circular Economy are frequently associated with industrial systems, technological innovation, and green business models, recent research increasingly highlights the importance of socio-cultural dimensions in enabling sustainability transitions (Laurenti et al. 2018). Circularity is not solely a technical or economic process, but also a socially embedded practice shaped by institutions, values, traditions, and collective behavioural patterns (Džajić Uršič, Fric, and Rončević 2024). In this regard, traditional culinary systems provide an important yet often overlooked example of historically embedded circular practices. Long before sustainability became a strategic policy objective, many local and ethnic cuisines developed adaptive mechanisms grounded in resource efficiency, preservation, reuse, and low-waste food preparation. Practices such as fermentation, drying, seasonal cooking, nose-to-tail consumption, and the creative transformation of leftovers into new meals emerged not as lifestyle trends but as practical responses to scarcity, rural living conditions, and limited access to resources.

Such practices are especially characteristic of culinary traditions across the Danube Region, where diverse ethnic communities historically developed highly resourceful gastronomic systems shaped by environmental conditions, agricultural cycles, social organisation, and historical instability. In many cases, frugality represented a necessity for survival; however, these adaptive culinary strategies simultaneously generated complex forms of local knowledge and cultural continuity. What contemporary sustainability discourse now defines as “zero waste,” “local sourcing,” or “resource efficiency” has long existed within traditional culinary heritage (Laurenti et al. 2018; Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2019; Morone et al. 2019). Frugality, in this way, is not presented as a limitation, but as a form of adaptive intelligence capable of contributing to sustainable regional development and socially inclusive innovation (Radjou, Prabhu, and Ahuja 2012; Folke 2006).

Contemporary tourism and heritage policies increasingly recognise gastronomy as an important component of regional identity, cultural resilience, and sustainable local development (Everett and Aitchison 2008). Culinary heritage is no longer understood merely as food consumption, but also as a form of intangible cultural heritage that carries symbolic meaning, social memory, and cultural identity (UNESCO 2003). Traditional dishes and preparation methods often reflect historical experiences of migration, poverty, adaptation, and coexistence among diverse ethnic communities. In this sense, gastronomic resourcefulness reflects not only economic adaptation but also cultural resilience and social innovation.

The *Culinary Trail of the Ethnic and Local Cuisine in the Danube Region* project emerges within this broader framework connecting culinary heritage, sustainable tourism, social innovation, and circular approaches to regional development. The project explicitly promotes local culinary traditions, short value chains, sustainable tourism models, and the inclusion of disadvantaged and rural communities across the Danube Region. Furthermore, the “Frugal Gastronomes” component of the project specifically emphasises creative and resource-efficient culinary solutions, zero-waste approaches, preservation techniques, and affordable local gastronomy as tools for sustainable development and culinary innovation. More specifically, the project promotes short value chains and quality local products from the primary sector, while also targeting geographically remote, rural, and disadvantaged communities across the Danube Region. Its approach, therefore, connects culinary heritage preservation with local economic development, social inclusion, and sustainable tourism practice.

This chapter examines frugality and resourcefulness in culinary heritage through the theoretical perspectives of Circular Economy, frugal innovation, cultural resilience, and socio-cultural embeddedness. Rather than interpreting frugality solely as a condition of scarcity, the chapter conceptualises it as a historically embedded form of adaptive intelligence and sustainable practice. Analysing traditional culinary systems and contemporary sustainability frameworks, the chapter argues that frugal gastronomy represents an important intersection of cultural heritage preservation, circular-economy principles, and sustainable tourism development in the Danube Region.

Conceptual framing

Frugal Innovation and Resourcefulness

The concept of frugal innovation has gained significant attention in recent decades as societies increasingly seek sustainable, resource-efficient responses to economic, environmental, and social challenges. Initially associated with emerging economies and technological adaptation under conditions of scarcity, frugal innovation is the ability to create value with limited resources, reduce costs, and maximise functionality (Radjou, Prabhu, and Ahuja 2012). Rather than emphasising abundance, optimisation, or technological complexity, frugal innovation is grounded in adaptability, simplicity, accessibility, and practical resourcefulness.

Although the concept has frequently been applied to industrial production, business development, and technological systems, its principles are highly relevant to culinary heritage and gastronomy. Counihan and Van Esterik (2013) argue that traditional food systems evolved under conditions that demanded continuous adaptation to seasonal fluctuations, economic constraints, environmental uncertainty, and limited access to ingredients. In many rural and ethnically diverse communities, culinary knowledge developed precisely to minimise waste, preserve food for long periods, and creatively transform modest ingredients into nutritionally sufficient meals. In many Danube communities, stale bread was reused in soups or dumpling dishes, while preserved vegetables, smoked meats, and fermented products were essential parts of winter diets. Such practices reduced waste while extending the lifespan of locally available ingredients (Culinary Trail project 2024).

Weyrauch and Herstatt (2017) identify three defining characteristics of frugal innovation: substantial cost reduction, concentration on core functionalities, and optimised performance levels. These characteristics can be directly observed within traditional culinary systems, where recipes and preparation techniques often prioritise utility, flexibility, and efficient use of available resources over luxury or excess. Importantly, frugal innovation in gastronomy should not be understood merely as “cheap cooking,” but rather as a culturally embedded adaptive strategy capable of generating environmental, social, and economic value simultaneously.

Recent sustainability debates increasingly recognise that innovation does not emerge exclusively from technologically advanced systems, but also from local knowledge, everyday practices, and community-based adaptation (Kara et al. 2022). In this context, frugal gastronomy represents an important example of socially embedded innovation. Culinary traditions developed under conditions of necessity frequently embody principles now promoted within sustainability transitions, including low resource consumption, reduced environmental impact, local sourcing,

and circular resource use. The relevance of such practices has become particularly visible in the context of food waste reduction and sustainable tourism development, where traditional culinary knowledge is increasingly reinterpreted as a valuable resource for future-oriented innovation.

Culinary Heritage and Cultural Capital

Food has long represented more than biological necessity or material consumption. Culinary practices simultaneously function as cultural expressions, systems of identity formation, and mechanisms of social distinction. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital provides an important theoretical framework for understanding how food practices acquire symbolic and social value within different historical and social contexts (Bourdieu 1984). According to Bourdieu, taste is socially constructed and closely connected to systems of power, class, and cultural legitimacy. Culinary preferences, therefore, reflect not only individual choices but also broader cultural hierarchies and processes of social differentiation.

Historically, many traditional and frugal dishes were associated with poverty, rurality, or marginal social groups. Meals based on leftovers, preserved ingredients, inexpensive grains, or secondary cuts of meat often emerged from conditions of scarcity and economic necessity. However, contemporary food culture has increasingly revalorised these culinary traditions as authentic, artisanal, sustainable, and culturally desirable. Dishes once considered "food of necessity" are today frequently repositioned within gastronomy tourism, fine dining, and heritage branding as symbols of authenticity and local identity (Sims 2009; Johnston and Baumann 2015).

This transformation reflects broader shifts in the symbolic economy of food. As globalisation and mass food production have standardised culinary experiences, local and ethnic cuisines have gained importance as markers of uniqueness, tradition, and cultural continuity (Everett and Aitchison 2008). Culinary heritage has therefore become an increasingly important component of tourism development strategies, particularly in regions seeking to differentiate themselves through local identity and cultural specificity. As Bessière (1998) argues, traditional food and local gastronomy increasingly function as strategic resources for rural development, enabling regions to combine heritage preservation with tourism diversification and local economic revitalisation. These culinary practices are often deeply tied to family memory and local identity. Recipes are transmitted informally across generations, frequently adapting to changing economic and social conditions while preserving recognisable regional characteristics.

UNESCO's recognition of intangible cultural heritage further strengthened the understanding of gastronomy as an important carrier of collective memory and intergenerational knowledge (UNESCO 2003). Culinary traditions preserve not only recipes and preparation techniques, but also narratives, rituals, agricultural practices, and social relationships embedded within local communities. This is particularly significant in ethnically diverse regions such as the Danube area, where food traditions frequently reflect long-term cultural interaction, migration histories, and hybrid forms of identity.

Within this framework, frugal gastronomy gains additional symbolic value. Practices of preservation, reuse, and resourcefulness increasingly align with contemporary ethical and sustainability values, transforming formerly marginalised culinary practices into culturally celebrated forms of sustainable living. Culinary heritage tourism thus plays an important role in reinterpreting and legitimising traditional knowledge systems that were historically overlooked or socially devalued.

The *Culinary Trail* project directly contributes to this process by positioning ethnic and local cuisines as valuable components of regional identity, cultural preservation, and sustainable tourism development through its emphasis on local storytelling, culinary diversity, and heritage-based gastronomy. In this way, culinary heritage becomes not only a tourism resource but also a mechanism for preserving locally embedded forms of knowledge and identity.

Cultural Resilience and Resourcefulness

The concept of cultural resilience refers to a community's capacity to preserve, adapt, and transmit cultural practices despite social, economic, political, or environmental pressures. Within heritage studies, resilience is increasingly understood not as static preservation, but as the ability of cultural systems to evolve and remain meaningful under changing conditions (Adger 2000). Culinary traditions represent an important dimension of such resilience because food practices often preserve knowledge, identity, and collective memory that endure across generations, even during periods of instability or transformation.

Historically, many traditional culinary systems developed under conditions of hardship, including economic deprivation, environmental uncertainty, war, migration, or geographic isolation. Resourcefulness, therefore, became an essential survival strategy. Communities developed methods for preserving food, extending limited resources, and adapting recipes according to seasonal and material constraints. These adaptive practices enabled not only physical survival but also the preservation of social cohesion and cultural continuity.

In this sense, resourcefulness can be understood as a culturally embedded form of resilience. Folke (2006) further emphasises that resilience within social-ecological systems depends on adaptive capacity, learning processes, and the ability of communities to respond creatively to changing environmental and socio-economic conditions. Traditional culinary knowledge represents one such adaptive mechanism. The ability to creatively manage scarcity reflects accumulated local knowledge developed through long-term interaction with environmental and social conditions. Such knowledge is frequently transmitted informally through families, local communities, and everyday practice rather than through formal institutional systems (UNESCO 2003; Bessière 1998). Consequently, culinary heritage functions simultaneously as a repository of practical survival strategies and as a mechanism of intergenerational learning.

Recent disruptions linked to climate change, rising food prices, and fragile global supply chains have further renewed interest in traditional adaptive food systems. Practices once dismissed as outdated or associated with poverty are increasingly relevant in contemporary debates on resilience and sustainable living.

Increasingly, local food knowledge is recognised not as a remnant of the past, but as a potential resource for future resilience and sustainable transition. Traditional low-waste culinary practices, seasonal food systems, and community-based food cultures may therefore contribute valuable insights for contemporary sustainability governance.

The Danube Region is a particularly relevant context for examining these dynamics, given its ethnic diversity, rural landscapes, and complex historical transformations. Many regional cuisines emerged over centuries through adaptation to political change, economic uncertainty, and intercultural exchange. Culinary practices thus reflect not only regional biodiversity and agricultural systems, but also broader histories of coexistence, mobility, and survival.

Frugality and Circular Gastronomy

Contemporary sustainability discourse increasingly recognises food systems as a key area requiring structural transformation. Current global patterns of food production and consumption generate significant environmental pressures through resource extraction, food waste, carbon emissions, and unsustainable supply chains (FAO 2019). Within this context, circular gastronomy has emerged as an approach that applies Circular Economy principles to food systems by promoting resource efficiency, waste reduction, local sourcing, regenerative practices, and the continual reuse of biological materials (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2019; FAO 2019).

Circular gastronomy challenges the dominant linear model of food consumption, in which production, distribution, consumption, and disposal operate as separate stages that generate large quantities of waste. Instead, circular approaches emphasise interconnected systems in which food resources are used for as long as possible through preservation, reuse, recycling, composting, and regenerative agricultural practices (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2017).

Food waste reduction has consequently become one of the key priorities within circular food systems, particularly in relation to sustainable consumption, valorisation of surplus materials, and more efficient resource management across food supply chains (Morone et al. 2019).

Traditional culinary systems often embodied circular principles long before the Circular Economy emerged as a formal concept. Seasonal cooking, preservation methods, low-waste preparation techniques, local supply chains, and the reuse of ingredients were everyday practices within many communities. From this perspective, frugal gastronomy can be interpreted as a historically embedded form of circular practice rooted in adaptive local knowledge rather than contemporary sustainability policy alone.

Recent research increasingly emphasises that successful circular transitions require socio-cultural embeddedness and behavioural adaptation in addition to technological innovation (Laurenti et al. 2018; Džajić Uršič, Fric, and Rončević 2024). Food practices are particularly shaped by habits, traditions, social norms, and cultural meanings, making gastronomy an important area for understanding how sustainability transitions are integrated into everyday life. Traditional culinary knowledge may therefore contribute to sustainability not only through technical efficiency, but also through socially accepted and culturally meaningful practices of resource management.

Within tourism development, circular gastronomy additionally contributes to strengthening local economies and reducing dependence on globalised supply chains. Short value chains, regional sourcing, and locally embedded culinary experiences increasingly align with broader goals of sustainable tourism and regional resilience. Culinary heritage tourism can therefore function simultaneously as a cultural preservation mechanism and as a platform for promoting sustainable consumption practices. This connection is also visible in the Culinary Trail framework, which links circular gastronomy with practical mechanisms such as local sourcing, short food supply chains, sustainable tourism routes, and the valorisation of ethnic and local culinary products. In this way, the project translates circular-economy principles into concrete gastronomic and tourism practices.

Frugal Gastronomy as a Socio-Cultural Circular Practice

From Scarcity to Sustainability

For centuries, culinary practices across Europe developed under conditions of scarcity, uncertainty, and limited access to resources. In rural and peripheral regions, food preparation was closely connected to agricultural cycles, seasonal availability, household economies, and collective survival strategies. What contemporary sustainability discourse now frames as "resource efficiency" or "low-waste consumption" historically represented an everyday necessity. Communities learned to preserve food for the winter months, creatively reuse leftovers, minimise waste, and use ingredients in their entirety because these practices were essential for survival rather than ideological choices.

However, the social meaning of frugality has changed considerably over time. Throughout much of the twentieth century, frugal food practices were frequently associated with poverty, social marginality, or economic underdevelopment. Traditional dishes based on preserved vegetables, grains, leftovers, or less desirable cuts of meat were often perceived as symbols of deprivation and rural backwardness. Industrialisation, economic growth, and mass consumer culture gradually transformed abundance into a marker of prosperity, while convenience and excess became normalised features of modern food systems (Counihan and Van Esterik 2013).

In recent decades, this perception has shifted significantly. Contemporary sustainability concerns, including food waste, climate change, and the environmental impact of industrial food systems, have prompted a re-evaluation of traditional culinary practices. Increasingly, practices once considered necessary are being reframed as models of responsible consumption, sustainability, and ethical gastronomy. Seasonal cooking, fermentation, local sourcing, and whole-food utilisation are no longer interpreted merely as remnants of the past but as valuable knowledge systems capable of addressing contemporary environmental and social challenges.

The changing perception of frugal food also reflects broader shifts in contemporary food culture. As Bourdieu (1984) observed, taste and food preferences are socially constructed and linked to changing forms of cultural capital. In contemporary food culture, authenticity, locality, artisanal production, and sustainability have become desirable symbolic values. Traditional "peasant food," once socially devalued, is now increasingly reinterpreted as authentic heritage cuisine within gastronomy tourism and high-end culinary culture. Johnston and Baumann (2015) describe this process as part of contemporary "foodie" culture, in which authenticity, locality, and ethical consumption increasingly serve as markers of distinction and cultural value.

The growing popularity of slow food movements, farm-to-table gastronomy, and local food experiences demonstrates a wider societal shift toward food systems perceived as more ethical, sustainable, and culturally meaningful (Petrini 2007).

Within this context, frugal gastronomy occupies a particularly important position. It connects historical experiences of scarcity with contemporary sustainability transitions, while simultaneously preserving cultural memory and local identity. Rather than representing merely an economic condition, frugality increasingly functions as a social and cultural value associated with moderation, resilience, environmental responsibility, and adaptive knowledge. This reinterpretation is especially visible in tourism and heritage policies that seek to valorise local culinary traditions as part of sustainable regional development strategies.

European sustainability frameworks increasingly emphasise similar principles. The European Green Deal and the Circular Economy Action Plan promote waste reduction, sustainable food systems, local production, and responsible consumption as key priorities for future development (European Commission 2020a). Likewise, the Farm to Fork Strategy highlights the importance of sustainable food chains, reduced food waste, and environmentally responsible gastronomy within broader climate and sustainability objectives (European Commission 2020b). Many traditional culinary practices embedded within local communities already embody these principles through long-established forms of adaptive resource management.

Traditional Culinary Knowledge as Circular Knowledge

Contemporary discussions on the Circular Economy frequently focus on technological innovation, industrial systems, and infrastructure for resource management. Nevertheless, many principles associated with circularity have existed for generations within traditional food cultures and local culinary systems. Long before the formalisation of Circular Economy policies, communities developed highly adaptive practices based on reuse, preservation, waste minimisation, and careful management of limited resources. Traditional culinary knowledge can therefore be understood as an important form of embedded circular knowledge.

Circular food systems aim to reduce waste and maintain the value of biological resources for as long as possible through reuse, regeneration, and efficient circulation of materials (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2019). In many traditional cuisines, these principles emerged organically through everyday practice. In many Danube communities, stale bread was reused in soups or dumpling dishes, while preserved vegetables and smoked meats formed the basis of winter diets. Ingredients were rarely discarded, while leftovers were commonly transformed into new dishes through creative culinary adaptation. In numerous rural communities, cooking practices were organised around the logic of maximising utility while minimising material loss.

These examples show that circularity is not only a technological concept, but also a social and cultural practice shaped by habits, everyday routines, and locally embedded forms of knowledge.

As Laurenti et al. (2018) argue, the Circular Economy is deeply socially embedded and dependent on cultural values, institutions, and behavioural norms. Culinary traditions represent a particularly important example of this embeddedness because food practices are closely connected to identity, memory, and everyday social organisation.

Traditional gastronomy also reflects local ecological knowledge developed through long-term interaction with the environment. Seasonal food systems, local sourcing, and adaptive agricultural practices historically enabled communities to function within relatively closed or semi-closed regional resource loops. Such systems often relied on short supply chains, local biodiversity, and low-energy food preparation techniques (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2019; FAO 2019). Although these practices originally emerged from necessity rather than environmental ideology, they increasingly align with contemporary sustainability objectives focused on resilience and resource efficiency.

Recent sustainability research also highlights the importance of integrating cultural and social dimensions into sustainability transitions (Geels 2002; Köhler et al. 2019). Technological solutions alone are insufficient without behavioural change and socially accepted practices. Traditional culinary systems may therefore provide valuable insights for future sustainability governance

precisely because they already embody culturally legitimised forms of low-waste consumption and adaptive resource use.

It is important to avoid romanticising traditional food systems. Historical frugality frequently emerged under difficult social and economic conditions, including poverty, insecurity, and restricted access to resources. Nevertheless, the adaptive knowledge generated under such circumstances remains highly relevant for contemporary sustainability challenges. In periods marked by climate uncertainty, supply chain disruptions, and rising concerns about food security, local knowledge systems increasingly serve as an important source of resilience.

Frugality, Tourism, and Regional Development

The relationship between gastronomy, tourism, and regional development has become increasingly important within contemporary cultural and sustainability policies. Food tourism is no longer understood solely as a supplementary tourism activity, but as a strategic mechanism for strengthening regional identity, local economies, and cultural visibility (Everett and Slocum 2013). Culinary heritage has gained particular relevance in regions seeking to differentiate themselves through authenticity, local traditions, and experiential tourism models.

Unlike mass tourism models that depend on intensive consumption and standardised experiences, heritage-based gastronomy tourism often emphasises locality, seasonality, small-scale production, and community participation. Such approaches align closely with broader sustainability objectives promoted by European and international development strategies, including responsible tourism, short value chains, and support for rural economies.

The European Union increasingly recognises gastronomy and local food systems as important components of sustainable regional development. Policy frameworks connected to rural development, cultural heritage preservation, and smart specialisation strategies emphasise the importance of local identity, sustainable entrepreneurship, and community-based innovation (European Commission 2020a). Similarly, UNESCO's approach to intangible cultural heritage highlights gastronomy as an important mechanism for safeguarding cultural diversity and strengthening social cohesion (UNESCO 2003).

In tourism studies, authenticity has become a central concept explaining the growing interest in local food experiences. Contemporary tourists increasingly seek experiences perceived as culturally meaningful, locally embedded, and environmentally responsible (Sims 2009; Everett and Slocum 2013). Traditional culinary practices, therefore, gain economic and symbolic value precisely because they offer alternatives to standardised global consumption patterns. In many cases, dishes historically associated with modest living conditions are today transformed into highly valued tourism experiences connected to narratives of heritage, locality, and sustainability.

Gastronomy tourism can contribute to regional resilience by supporting local producers, preserving traditional knowledge, and strengthening small-scale economic networks. Short food supply chains and locally embedded culinary experiences may reduce dependence on globalised production systems while simultaneously creating new economic opportunities for rural and peripheral regions. Such approaches are particularly relevant in the Danube Region, where many communities face demographic decline, economic marginalisation, and challenges related to preserving cultural heritage.

The Frugal Gastronomes competition provides a concrete example of this approach. It asks participants to develop resource-efficient dish concepts using low-cost, locally available, or surplus ingredients, while explicitly encouraging zero-waste practices, food preservation, creative substitutions, and adaptability across different ethnic cuisines or restaurant models. Particularly significant is the project's understanding of gastronomy as a tool for social inclusion and regional resilience. By involving local communities, disadvantaged groups, and small-scale producers, the project moves beyond purely commercial tourism development and positions culinary heritage within broader sustainability and social innovation frameworks. Frugality and resourcefulness are therefore not interpreted as indicators of limitation or underdevelopment, but as forms of adaptive cultural knowledge capable of contributing to more sustainable and locally embedded futures.

Discussion

The growing contemporary interest in frugality, local gastronomy, and sustainable food systems reflects broader societal transformations related to environmental awareness, responsible consumption, and the search for more resilient development models. Within this context, traditional culinary practices are increasingly repositioned from symbols of historical necessity to examples of adaptive knowledge and sustainable resource management. The analysis presented in this chapter suggests that frugal gastronomy should not be understood merely as a culinary category, but rather as a socio-cultural system that connects heritage, sustainability, innovation, and regional development.

One of the central findings emerging from the discussion is the strong compatibility between traditional culinary resourcefulness and contemporary Circular Economy principles. Practices such as food preservation, ingredient reuse, seasonal consumption, and reliance on local supply systems have historically developed as survival strategies under conditions of scarcity. Yet these same practices now closely align with sustainability goals promoted in contemporary European and global policy frameworks, including waste reduction, resource efficiency, and resilient local economies (European Commission 2020a; Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2019). Traditional culinary systems, therefore, illustrate that many principles associated with circularity existed long before the institutionalisation of Circular Economy discourse (Gregson et al. 2015; Laurenti et al. 2018).

Critical circular economy scholarship also warns against reducing circularity to purely technocratic or market-oriented solutions detached from social realities (Gregson et al. 2015). Traditional culinary systems demonstrate that resource circulation is also deeply connected to everyday cultural practices, social relationships, and local value systems.

Recent critiques additionally caution that sustainability and circular economy discourses may become overly vague or conceptually inflated if detached from concrete social practices and measurable transformations (Kirchherr 2023). Traditional culinary systems offer a grounded example of how circular principles can operate through everyday behavioural and cultural practices rather than through abstract policy rhetoric alone.

Food systems are deeply socially and culturally embedded, shaped by habits, traditions, symbolic meanings, and everyday practices. As several authors argue, successful sustainability transitions require behavioural and cultural adaptation in addition to technical solutions (Geels 2002; Köhler et al. 2019). In this regard, culinary heritage represents an important field through which sustainability principles can become socially meaningful and culturally accepted. Traditional

gastronomy offers examples of practices already integrated into local lifestyles and collective memory, increasing their long-term social legitimacy and resilience.

The reinterpretation of frugality within contemporary gastronomy also reflects broader transformations in systems of cultural value. Practices historically associated with poverty or marginality are increasingly reframed as authentic, ethical, and environmentally responsible forms of consumption. This transformation aligns with Bourdieu's (1984) understanding of cultural capital, in which the social meanings attached to food evolve in response to changing cultural hierarchies and symbolic values. Local and frugal cuisines are therefore no longer viewed solely through the lens of economic necessity, but increasingly as markers of authenticity, sustainability, and responsible living.

However, this process also raises important critical questions. The growing commodification of culinary heritage within tourism markets may lead to the romanticisation of historical scarcity and the commercialisation of practices originally rooted in hardship and social inequality. Heritage-based gastronomy tourism often transforms everyday survival practices into marketable cultural experiences for external consumption. As Smith (2006) argues in heritage studies, processes of heritage valorisation are never neutral but involve selective reinterpretations of the past shaped by contemporary economic and political interests. Consequently, there is a risk that frugal gastronomy becomes detached from its original socio-historical context and reduced to aestheticised narratives of authenticity. This tension is particularly visible when dishes historically associated with scarcity are repositioned as premium gastronomic experiences for tourism markets.

Nevertheless, the chapter argues that such tensions do not diminish the broader relevance of traditional culinary knowledge for sustainability transitions. On the contrary, they highlight the need for more socially sensitive and locally embedded approaches to heritage tourism and regional development. Sustainable gastronomy should not merely commercialise local traditions, but also support local communities, preserve cultural continuity, and strengthen regional resilience (Smith 2006; Bessière 1998). This is particularly important in rural and peripheral areas facing demographic decline, economic marginalisation, and loss of intangible heritage.

Conclusion

Frugality in culinary heritage reveals how communities historically developed sophisticated forms of adaptation under conditions of limited resources. Traditional culinary practices represent far more than historical remnants of rural life or economic necessity. Instead, they can be understood as socially embedded systems of adaptive knowledge that historically enabled communities to manage scarcity, preserve resources, and maintain cultural continuity under changing environmental and socio-economic conditions.

The chapter argued that many principles promoted in contemporary sustainability frameworks—including waste reduction, reuse, local sourcing, seasonal consumption, and resource efficiency—have long been part of traditional culinary systems. In this sense, frugal gastronomy may be interpreted as a historically embedded form of circular practice that emerged organically through everyday life and collective experience rather than through formal sustainability policy. Traditional food knowledge, therefore, offers important insights into current debates on sustainable consumption, resilience, and regional development.

At the same time, the analysis highlighted the cultural and symbolic transformation of frugal food practices within contemporary society. Culinary traditions once associated with scarcity and marginality are increasingly revalorised as authentic, sustainable, and culturally meaningful experiences within gastronomy tourism and heritage development. This transformation reflects broader changes in consumption patterns and cultural values, where locality, sustainability, and authenticity have become increasingly important social markers.

The chapter additionally emphasised that sustainability transitions cannot rely exclusively on technological innovation and economic regulation. Long-term sustainability also depends on socially embedded practices, cultural legitimacy, and behavioural adaptation. Traditional culinary knowledge is an important example of how sustainability principles can be integrated into everyday life through culturally accepted practices and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Within this broader context, the Culinary Trail project illustrates how culinary heritage can simultaneously contribute to sustainable tourism, cultural preservation, social innovation, and regional resilience. By promoting local knowledge, frugal gastronomy, short value chains, and resource-efficient culinary practices, the project demonstrates the continuing relevance of traditional adaptive systems within contemporary sustainability agendas. Its emphasis on local products, ethnic culinary diversity, and community-based participation reflects broader European efforts to support sustainable regional development through culturally embedded forms of innovation. At the same time, the project highlights how gastronomy can serve not only as a tourism product but also as a mechanism for strengthening local identity, preserving intangible heritage, and supporting socially inclusive economic development in rural and peripheral areas. Through initiatives such as the *Frugal Gastronomes* competition, the project additionally encourages creative approaches to food preparation based on reuse, preservation, affordability, and low-waste principles, translating abstract sustainability objectives into concrete culinary practices.

Saying all above, the chapter suggests that frugality should not be interpreted solely as a condition of limitation or deprivation. Rather, it should be understood as a form of adaptive intelligence embedded within cultural practice, everyday experience, and collective memory. Traditional culinary systems developed sophisticated forms of resource management long before sustainability became institutionalised within contemporary policy frameworks. In many communities, practices of preservation, seasonal cooking, ingredient reuse, and careful consumption represented essential strategies of resilience shaped by environmental and socio-economic realities. Today, these same practices increasingly resonate with contemporary concerns related to food waste, climate change, sustainable consumption, and regional self-sufficiency. In an era shaped by environmental uncertainty, fragile supply chains, and growing resource pressures, traditional culinary resourcefulness offers not only heritage value but also practical and conceptual lessons for more resilient, socially embedded, and sustainable futures.

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CULTURAL RESILIENCE AND TRANSMISSION THROUGH SOCIAL SYSTEMS

Lucia Căpățînă [5]
"Ion Creanga" State Pedagogical University of Chisinau

Vitalie Dilan
"Ion Creanga" State Pedagogical University of Chisinau

Afanasie Prepelița
"Ion Creanga" State Pedagogical University of Chisinau

Abstract

This chapter analyses the cultural resilience of the Gagauz ethnic group through the functioning of social systems that preserve, reproduce and adapt intangible cultural heritage. The main argument is that Gagauz identity is transmitted not only through formal institutions or static heritage documentation, but through a living network of households, culinary practices, ritual meals, local festivals, schools, cultural houses, museums, tourism enterprises, local authorities and digital platforms. Special attention is given to culinary heritage as a practical and symbolic medium through which memory, language, seasonal rhythms, religious practices, hospitality and intergenerational knowledge are continuously reproduced. This chapter focuses on the Gagauz ethnic group—one of thirty distinct ethnic communities selected across the Danube Region within the framework of the Culinary Trail project—drawing on recent census data, field documentation, and community-based heritage valorisation. The analysis shows that the Gagauz community possesses strong cultural resources, but also faces structural vulnerabilities: rural depopulation, language shift, reduced everyday use of Gagauz, ageing of knowledge holders, uneven tourism infrastructure and the risk of commercial simplification of traditional cuisine. The chapter concludes that cultural resilience depends on the capacity to transform culinary heritage into an integrated social transmission system linking family knowledge, community institutions, youth participation, digital cataloguing, local entrepreneurship and transnational cooperation.

Keywords: Gagauz ethnic group; cultural resilience; social systems; culinary heritage; intangible cultural heritage; intergenerational transmission; Danube Region; community-based tourism

Introduction

Context and Background

Cultural resilience may be understood as the capacity of a community to maintain, reinterpret and transmit its identity under conditions of demographic, economic, linguistic and institutional change. In the case of ethnic communities, resilience does not mean the mechanical conservation of the past. Rather, it refers to the ability to keep traditions socially meaningful while adapting them

[5] capatina.lucia@upsc.md, dilan.vitalie@upsc.md, prepelita.afanasie@upsc.md
@Căpățînă Lucia, Dilan Vitalie, Prepelița Afanasie. This is an open-access chapter distributed under the Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND license which enables reusers to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, for noncommercial purposes only, and only if attribution is given to the creator.

to new contexts: mobility, tourism, digital communication, modern education and changing patterns of family life. The Gagauz ethnic group provides a particularly relevant case for such an analysis because its cultural identity is simultaneously linguistic, religious, territorial, culinary and social. It is rooted in southern Moldova and neighbouring cross-border spaces, but is also exposed to migration, multilingualism, rural transformation and globalising food practices. According to the 2024 Census data, 97,205 persons declared Gagauz ethnicity, representing approximately 4.0% of the total population of the Republic of Moldova. Of these, 41,360 lived in urban areas and 55,845 in rural areas. This distribution confirms that the community remains strongly connected to rural settlements, where domestic food practices, household rituals, local memory and seasonal traditions are usually more visible and more easily transmitted. At the same time, the census data also reveal a vulnerability: while 87,407 persons declared Gagauz as their mother tongue, only 50,546 persons declared Gagauz as the language usually spoken. This difference between ethnic belonging, mother tongue and habitual language use is highly relevant for understanding cultural transmission (Census 2024).

Within this context, culinary heritage is not simply a component of tourism or local gastronomy. It is a social archive. Traditional dishes preserve memories of migration, adaptation to the steppe environment, religious calendars, family events, local ingredients and community status. They are learned by doing: observing elders, participating in weddings and commemorations, preparing festive meals, sharing food with guests, and repeating techniques that are often not fully written down. For this reason, the Gagauz case allows a broader reflection on how ethnic identity is transmitted through social systems rather than through isolated cultural objects.

Research Problem

The central research problem addressed in this chapter is the gap between heritage documentation and living cultural transmission. Projects can identify recipes, photograph dishes, describe ingredients and create digital catalogues, but culture remains resilient only if these documented elements continue to circulate through families, institutions, markets, festivals and educational practices. A dish can be inventoried and still become socially inactive if young people no longer prepare it, if the language associated with it is lost, if ritual meanings disappear, or if tourism reduces it to a simplified commodity.

Aim and Specific Objectives

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the mechanisms through which Gagauz cultural heritage, with particular emphasis on culinary heritage, is preserved and transmitted through social systems. The corresponding specific objectives address the following challenges:

- identify the main social systems involved in the transmission of Gagauz heritage,
- examine culinary practices as carriers of collective memory and community identity,
- interpret census and project data as indicators of both resilience and vulnerability,
- assess the role of tourism, digital tools and cross-border cooperation in renewing transmission,
- formulate key findings relevant for cultural policy, community-based tourism and future research.

Context and Background

Theoretical Background

The theoretical foundation of this chapter combines four perspectives:

- cultural resilience,
- intangible cultural heritage,
- intergenerational transmission and
- sustainable culinary tourism.

Cultural resilience highlights the capacity of a group to maintain continuity despite external pressure. It does not assume that traditions remain unchanged, but rather that communities can selectively adapt them while maintaining symbolic coherence. In this sense, resilience is both conservative and innovative: it protects identity while enabling new forms of visibility and participation. For a territorially compact but numerically small group like the Gagauz (97,205 individuals within Moldova), resilience is tested by high outward migration and rural-to-urban shifts. Resilience theory helps explain how traditional foodways migrate from domestic village hearths into urban restaurants, digital platforms, and cross-border networks without losing their underlying role in anchoring Gagauz identity.

Under the UNESCO framework, *intangible cultural heritage* and linguistic vitality are fundamentally performative and process driven. The concept of intangible cultural heritage is essential because Gagauz culinary traditions are not reducible to material products. Recipes, techniques, terminology, serving rules, ritual timing, symbolic meanings and collective memory are part of a living heritage system. UNESCO's work on endangered languages is also relevant here, because language loss often affects the transmission of oral traditions, ritual expressions, social practices and knowledge of the local environment. The Gagauz language belongs to the Oghuz branch of the Turkic language family and is identified in UNESCO materials among endangered or vulnerable linguistic traditions in Europe and surrounding regions (UNESCO 2010, 44, 182–183). The census gap between mother tongue and usual language use suggests that language vitality should be considered a key condition of culinary heritage transmission (Census 2024).

Intergenerational transmission – Culinary heritage is predominantly transmitted through informal, community-based social learning systems. It relies on "learning by doing"—a sensory, mimetic process involving observation, shared labour, and oral storytelling within the domestic sphere. If this informal transmission chain is broken—often due to youth migration, shifting gender roles, or changing household structures—the responsibility for cultural reproduction shifts increasingly to secondary institutions like museums, cultural centres, or school curricula. While valuable, these formal structures risk institutionalising and freezing a living culture, stripping it of its fluid, everyday spontaneity. Gagauz culinary practices explicitly map onto these transmission dynamics. Complex, labour-intensive dishes like *Kuzu çorbası* (requiring 4–5 hours of collaborative preparation) function as gendered and age-graded spaces for intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Sustainable culinary tourism - In sustainable tourism literature, culinary heritage is recognised as a powerful asset for rural diversification, territorial branding, and local economic empowerment. Culinary tourism can stimulate small-scale entrepreneurship, support local agricultural supply chains, and validate a community's self-worth on an international stage. However, critical tourism studies warn of the persistent threat of commodification and staged authenticity. Sustainable

tourism must therefore be community-based, ensuring that the local population retains ownership over the representation, economic benefits, and governance of their own heritage. This perspective directly frames the intervention of the Culinary Trail project, where the Gagauz community was selected as one of 30 distinct ethnic groups across the Danube Region. It enables an assessment of how transnational networks and digital tools can be used to build culinary trails that serve as active spaces for cultural transmission rather than purely commercial venues.

Literature Review

Culinary tourism literature emphasises that food experiences can shape destination identity, support rural economies and connect visitors with local culture. However, it also warns against the commodification of tradition, when food is simplified or staged primarily for external consumption. For the Gagauz community, the challenge is therefore to develop gastronomy as a channel of cultural transmission and economic resilience without disconnecting it from household knowledge, ritual meaning and local social relations. The Culinary Trail project is relevant in this context because its outputs and results, such as the Strategy and the Transnational Action Plans, explicitly connect culinary heritage with digital cataloguing, community participation, cross-border cooperation, youth engagement, local entrepreneurship and tourism routes (Bessière 1998, 21–34; Timothy 2015; Culinary Trail 2026).

Key Concepts

The Culinary Trail project framework is built around several key concepts that underpin its structure and operation in terms of cultural resilience and transmission through social systems. In this respect, one of the key concepts is the Living Network of Social Systems, understood as the primary ecosystem through which cultural resilience is sustained. Cultural resilience depends not on static archives, but on an active, interconnected network of everyday spaces. This concept focuses on the physical and institutional "circulatory system" of Gagauz culture, demonstrating that transmission succeeds only when distinct social nodes work together. These include households, where "learning by doing" occurs through shared family labour, as well as local guesthouses, wineries and regional tourism enterprises that function as active spaces of cultural practice rather than merely commercial outlets.

A second key concept is Socio-Ecological and Ritual Mapping, in which traditional gastronomy is conceptualised not as a list of menu items, but as a living repository that stores and transmits non-material social structures, environmental adaptations, and community values across the region: e. g., *Kuzu çorbası* encodes specific, male-centred ritualised labour within the Gagauz community (gendered knowledge); *Kallä* structures behaviour around religious fasting calendars, while *Murdya* maps the local botanical environment (spiritual & ecological rhythms).

The third concept is Multi-Scalar Heritage Governance, which explains how localised, informal social systems can scale up from local to transnational levels to remain viable in a modern, globalised world (UKNC 2025). Resilience depends on structured governance that links grassroots community practices with macro-level initiatives. This framework is anchored by the Transnational Action Plan and Culinary Trail Project, which positions the Gagauz as one of 30 selected ethnic groups across the Danube Region to foster cross-border cultural continuity.

Data

Description of Data Sources and Sampling Procedures

The chapter is based on qualitative data analysis derived from the Culinary Trail project and supported by selected quantitative indicators. The main data sources are:

- the 2024 Population and Housing Census annexes on ethno-cultural and demographic characteristics (Census 2024),
- the Transnational Action Plan for the Gagauz ethnic community developed within the Culinary Trail project,
- reports on Culinary Trail Training Programmes,
- field documentation of traditional Gagauz dishes carried out in April 2025 in ATU Gagauzia (photo and video material),
- the answers received from stakeholders via questionnaires and interviews.

A wide range of stakeholders were involved, from NGOs and private households to wineries, ethno-tourism complexes, restaurants, educational institutions and public institutions.

Methodology

Research Design

Methodologically, the chapter applies a qualitative case study approach, interpreting culinary heritage as a dynamic social system rather than a static list of food items. The analysis therefore focuses closely on actors, places, transmission channels, and structural risks, encompassing households, cooks, elders, young people, local businesses, wineries, guesthouses, schools, museums, cultural houses, municipalities, Local Action Groups, tourism offices, and digital platforms. Within this framework, census data from the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova were used, not for a full demographic analysis, but as indicators of the broader social conditions under which cultural transmission takes place (Table 1) (UNESCO 2010, 44, 182–183; Census 2024; Gridina 2025; Căpățînă and Odnostalco 2026).

Table 1. Selected demographic and linguistic indicators relevant for Gagauz cultural transmission

Indicator	Value	Interpretation for cultural transmission
Population of ATU Gagauzia	103,668 persons	The territorial autonomy provides an institutional framework for cultural policy and local tourism development
Population declaring Gagauz ethnicity, 2024	97,205 persons / about 4.0% of the population from ATU Gagauzia	The community is numerically small, but territorially and culturally significant
Urban/rural distribution	41,360 urban; 55,845 rural	Rural settlements remain central for household-based transmission of culinary and ritual practices
Gagauz declared as mother tongue	87,407 persons	The mother tongue remains an important identity marker
Gagauz usually spoken, age 3+	50,546 persons	Everyday language use is more fragile than ethnic identification or declared mother tongue

Data sources: Census 2024.

To complement this qualitative foundation, quantitative data were generated through a structured field data collection campaign (in April 2025) focused on the comprehensive collection of recipes from the Gagauz ethnic group and the mapping of their main preparation steps.
The field research followed a systematic pipeline beginning with the rigorous identification of key stakeholders, followed by the coordination of designated dates and times for field visits. During these site visits, live demonstrations of traditional recipes were conducted, allowing for the simultaneous collection of textual, photographic, and video documentation. Following the fieldwork phase, the gathered data underwent comprehensive analysis and translation into English. The finalised records were then introduced into the Culinary Trail digital catalogue, leading to the formal publication of the data within the digital platform – https://culinarytrail.eu/digital-catalogue/ (Culinary Trail 2026).

Analysis

Household, family and ritual meal as primary transmission systems

The first and most important system of cultural transmission is the household. In traditional communities, recipes are rarely transmitted as abstract written instructions. They are learned through repeated participation: washing, kneading, cutting, seasoning, filling, baking, tasting and serving. The household is therefore a school of practice. It transmits not only ingredients and procedures, but also gestures, timing, evaluations of taste, rules of hospitality, social roles and the emotional value of food.

Several documented Gagauz dishes illustrate this logic. "*Bulgur*" is described as a ceremonial dish usually prepared when newlyweds move into their new home after the wedding, made from lamb and bulgur with vegetables. Its importance is not limited to nutrition; it marks a transition in family life and symbolically connects marriage, household formation and communal recognition (Cebotari 2023). "*Kuzu çorbası*", a lamb sour soup requiring four to five hours of preparation and traditionally made by men, shows that culinary heritage also encodes gendered knowledge and ritualised labour. "*Sütleş*", a milk and rice dessert served cold for festive meals, and "*Kabaklı*", a sweet pumpkin pie that can also be prepared during fasting periods, link food practices with festive and religious calendars (Culinary Trail 2024; Culinary Trail 2026).

This household dimension is crucial for resilience. If family transmission weakens, culinary heritage becomes dependent on restaurants, festivals or museums. These institutions are valuable, but they cannot fully replace domestic practice. For this reason, cultural policies should not treat traditional dishes only as tourism products. They should also support intergenerational workshops, school-family events, video documentation with elders, and community recipe archives that keep the household at the centre of heritage transmission.

Culinary heritage as living memory and territorial identity

April 2025 field documentation provides a concrete territorial map of Gagauz culinary heritage. "*Gevrek*" was documented in Svetlii village at Cafe Colos; "*Kıırma*" or "*Kıvırma*" and "*Turşu*" in Congaz at Gagauz Sofrası; "*Suannı manca*" in Cazaclia in the Diulgher family household; "*Sarma*" in Joltai at the Ethno-estate of Petr Petkovich; "*Bulgur"* in Comrat at SA Vinuri de Comrat Winery.

This distribution is analytically important because it shows that culinary heritage is not located in one institution only. It is dispersed across villages, households, restaurants, guesthouses, wineries and ethno-tourism complexes (Culinary Trail 2026).

Each dish carries a different memory function: "*Gevrek*", a fried dough dessert shaped like roses and dusted with powdered sugar, transmits festive aesthetics and craft technique; "*Suannı manca*", a homemade chicken or meat sauce with many onions and traditional "*murdya"* seasoning, connects cuisine to the local herb environment of southern Moldova; "*Kallä*", a fasting dish based on stewed sauerkraut, rice and bulgur, links food to religious periods; "*Sarma*", prepared with pork meat, bulgur, rice and vegetables rolled in grape leaves, links Gagauz cuisine to the broader Balkan and Bessarabian culinary space while preserving local specificity; "*Cizlı mamaliga*", based on cornmeal, water, salt, hot oil and sheep cheese, reflects rural simplicity and pastoral ingredients (Culinary Trail 2026; Căpățînă and Odnostalco 2026).

Taken together, these results show that the Gagauz culinary system is not a decorative catalogue of exotic dishes, but a territorial memory system. The documented units of culinary heritage record migration history, adaptation to the Bugeac steppe environment, household economy, religious calendars, livestock traditions, fasting rules, wedding practices, hospitality and social cohesion. This understanding is central to the chapter and to future cultural tourism strategies: each dish has to be treated as a node connecting a place, a knowledge holder, a preparation technique, a language form, a ritual context and a possible pathway for community-based tourism.

Language as a vulnerable channel of culinary transmission

Language is one of the most sensitive channels of heritage transmission. Food names such as "*Kıırma*", "*Kallä*", "*Suannı manca*", "*Kuzu çorbası*" or "*Piinirli kirde*" are not merely labels. They carry sound patterns, local spelling, multilingual adaptation and cultural memory. When a dish loses its original name, or when the name survives only as a transliteration for tourists, part of its cultural context becomes weaker. This does not mean that translation should be avoided; rather, translation should be accompanied by the preservation of original Gagauz terminology.

The 2024 Census data show that the number of persons declaring Gagauz as a mother tongue is significantly higher than the number declaring it as the language usually spoken. This gap is a warning signal. A community may continue to identify as Gagauz while using other languages in everyday life. In such a situation, culinary heritage can either help maintain the language, through dish names, songs, ritual expressions and oral explanations, or it can become detached from language and survive only as a visual or commercial product. From a resilience perspective, the first option is stronger (UNESCO 2010, 44, 182–183; Census 2024).

Consequently, digital catalogues, tourism menus, museum labels and training materials should systematically include the original Gagauz name, an English transliteration, a Romanian or Russian explanation where necessary, and a short cultural note. Such multilingual presentation would transform gastronomy into a tool of language visibility. It would also avoid reducing Gagauz cuisine to generic regional food.

Community institutions and collective transmission

Beyond the household, cultural transmission depends on institutions that provide continuity and public visibility. The Transnational Action Plan for the Gagauz ethnic group developed in the Culinary Trail project identifies the importance of municipalities, Local Action Groups, cultural institutions, tourism organisations, local businesses and educational actors. Such institutions are not external to heritage; they structure the conditions under which heritage can be practiced, taught and economically valorised. Houses of culture, museums, schools and local authorities can organise festivals, workshops, exhibitions, local culinary days and youth training programmes.

The Ukrainian Gagauz stakeholders provide an important comparative dimension. In Kotlovina, the Gagauz language is reported as being used broadly in the community and taught as a compulsory subject at school, while the village has a gastro-ethno-ecotourism route known as Destination Kotlovina. Another example is the Festival of Gagauz culture "Budzhak ildyzy", held annually, where visitors can taste traditional dishes such as "*Kurban*", see national costumes and participate in local practices. This example shows that cultural resilience is strongest where school, house of culture, museum, festival, local administration and tourism route function as a connected system.

This suggests that the preservation of Gagauz culinary heritage should not be delegated only to restaurants or tourism operators. It requires a networked model involving public institutions, local municipalities, schools, museums, wineries, guesthouses, families and Local Action Groups etc. The Culinary Trail platform provides the digital interface, but the content must remain grounded in community institutions and local knowledge holders.

Tourism, digitalisation and the risk of commodification

Tourism and digitalisation offer major opportunities for Gagauz cultural resilience. They can increase visibility, generate income, involve young people and redirect tourist flows toward rural communities. Culinary trails, tasting experiences, participatory workshops and local festivals can create direct links between small producers, households and visitors. The Culinary Trail project is particularly relevant because it connects documentation, digital cataloguing, local actors, and transnational cooperation across the Danube Region. Practical evidence of this synergy was provided by the field visits, the "making of" stages of live cooking demonstrations, and the final photographic and video materials, all of which were integrated into the Culinary Trail digital catalogue (Figure 1, Figure 2) (World Tourism Organization 2018, chap. 4; Culinary Trail 2026; Culinary Trail 2024).

Figure 1. “Making of” (a) and final result (b) for “Kuzu çorbası” documentation process with the Dolapci family, a private household in the town of Vulcanesti, ATU Gagauzia









a. “Making-of” process for a live cooking demonstration

b. Presentation of the final result

Note: Photos were taken during field trip documentation in ATU Gagauzia, Republic of Moldova, part of Activity 1.2, Culinary Trail Project; April 2025.

Figure 2. “Making of” (a) and final result (b) for “Kıırma” documentation process at Gagauz Sofrasi Ethno-touristic complex, Congaz village, ATU Gagauzia





a. “Making-of” process for a live cooking demonstration

b. Presentation of the final result

Note: Photos were taken during field trip documentation in ATU Gagauzia, Republic of Moldova, part of Activity 1.2, Culinary Trail Project; April 2025

However, tourism also introduces risks. When culinary heritage is adapted mainly for visitor expectations, recipes can be simplified, ritual meanings can be removed, and local names can be replaced by easier commercial labels. This process may increase short-term visibility while weakening long-term authenticity. The risk is especially high when heritage becomes separated from its social systems: the family that prepares it, the ritual where it belongs, the language that names it, and the local environment that provides ingredients (Bessière 1998, 21–34; Timothy 2015).

A balanced model should therefore be community-based. Tourism should not only sell dishes; it should explain their cultural role. Digital catalogues should not only display photographs; they should document stories, locations, people, techniques, terminology and contexts of use. Training programmes should not only teach entrepreneurship; they should also teach cultural interpretation, ethical representation, local sourcing and intergenerational interviewing. In this way, tourism becomes a transmission system rather than a mechanism of simplification.

Cross-border resilience: Republic of Moldova and Ukraine

The Gagauz community is present not only in the Republic of Moldova, but also in Ukraine, particularly in the Odesa region, as well as in other countries (Romania, Greece etc.) (Joshua Project 2026). In this study the Gagauz communities from Republic of Moldova and Ukraine have been analysed. Cross-border comparison reveals that cultural resilience is shaped by national contexts, but also by shared memory and language. Ukrainian Gagauz respondents emphasised local identity, preservation of household objects and customs, relations with museums and cultural institutions from ATU Gagauzia, and the importance of culture for the survival of a people. At the same time, the war context has created new pressures and emotional divisions, including avoidance of political discussions with relatives in Moldova.

From the perspective of this study, this cross-border dimension is analytically valuable. It shows that Gagauz identity is not confined to one administrative territory. It is a regional cultural system with local variations. Culinary heritage can therefore serve as a bridge across borders, because recipes, festivals and family memories may be less politically sensitive than formal identity debates. Cross-border culinary packages, joint documentation, youth exchanges and digital storytelling can strengthen cultural continuity while respecting different national loyalties and security contexts.

Key Findings

Clearly Structured Main Insights

The practical execution of Culinary Trail project activities provides clear, structured evidence regarding the strength of local cultural reproduction. Driven by this systematic approach, the core causal relationships governing Gagauz heritage transmission are synthetically formulated below:

a) Culinary heritage is the strongest practical medium of Gagauz cultural transmission. It links family, ritual, language, territory, hospitality and local economy in one living system.
b) The household remains the primary transmission institution. Restaurants, festivals and digital platforms are important, but they should complement rather than replace domestic intergenerational learning.
c) The language dimension is vulnerable and must be protected through culinary documentation. Original Gagauz dish names should be systematically preserved in catalogues, menus, video materials and educational resources.
d) Rural settlements are central for resilience. The rural majority within the Gagauz population suggests that heritage policy should support villages, not only urban cultural institutions.
e) Digital tools can strengthen resilience only if they remain community based. A digital catalogue should document people, places, meanings and techniques, not just images of food.
f) Tourism creates both opportunities and risks. It can generate income and visibility, but it may also simplify traditions if not governed by authenticity and community participation.
g) Cross-border cooperation with Ukrainian Gagauz communities is strategically important. It can expand documentation, strengthen identity and create a broader Danube cultural narrative.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

The case of the Gagauz ethnic group demonstrates that cultural resilience is not produced by heritage preservation alone, but by the continuous functioning of social systems that transmit identity in everyday life. Within the framework of the Culinary Trail project, culinary heritage is positioned as central to this process because it connects the most intimate sphere of family practice with the public spheres of festivals, tourism, education, and digital communication. Through dishes such as *“Bulgur”, “Kuzu çorbası”, “Kıırma”, “Suannı manca”, “Kallä”, “Sütleş”, “Gevrek”* and others, the community transmits not only food, but memories of marriage, fasting, hospitality, rural labour, gender roles, local plants, religious cycles, and territorial belonging.

The 2024 Census data confirm both resilience and vulnerability; the Gagauz community remains visible and territorially important, but the difference between declared ethnicity, mother tongue, and habitual language use indicates that cultural transmission cannot be taken for granted. The Culinary Trail project addresses this directly by demonstrating that the future of Gagauz heritage depends on whether culinary traditions remain embedded in living social systems or become detached cultural products. By studying the Gagauz as one of thirty distinct ethnic groups selected across the Danube Region, the broader project highlights that a resilient model must combine household knowledge, school activities, cultural institutions, local businesses, tourism routes, digital catalogues, and cross-border cooperation.

For policy and project practice, the main recommendation—fully aligned with the strategic vision of the entire Culinary Trail initiative—is to treat Gagauz culinary heritage as a system, not as a static list. Each documented unit of culinary heritage should be integrated into the transnational project ecosystem, connecting its original name, location, and knowledge holder to preparation techniques, ritual contexts, local ingredients, and potential for community-based tourism. Scaling

these localised findings up to the wider Danube Region framework ensures that such an approach can strengthen cultural identity, support rural economies, involve youth, and guarantee that Gagauz heritage remains a living, sustainable resource for future generations.

Limitations

The practical implication of the analysis is that future actions should be designed around transmission chains. A unit of culinary heritage should be recorded together with its social route: who prepares it, in which settlement, in what season or ritual context, which ingredients are used, which words are used in Gagauz, who teaches the younger generation, and whether the dish can be presented to visitors without losing its meaning. This approach would allow the Culinary Trail platform and similar initiatives to move beyond simple promotion and toward heritage governance.

Several concrete measures follow from this logic:

a. schools and youth groups should be involved through small practical modules: interviewing elders, filming preparation techniques, translating dish names, and organising community tasting events,
b. guesthouses, restaurants and wineries should be encouraged to cooperate with families and local cultural institutions, so that commercial presentation remains connected to authentic knowledge holders,
c. cross-border cooperation with Ukrainian Gagauz communities should focus on safe and culturally sensitive documentation, rather than on formalised events that may be difficult under current conditions.

The chapter also has limitations. The study is based mainly on project documentation, field study visits and selected census indicators, not on a full ethnographic survey. The demographic data are used only to frame the discussion of transmission and do not replace detailed sociolinguistic or anthropological research. In addition, the current documentation is richer for culinary practices of Gagauz community from Moldova than for the Gagauz communities in Ukraine. Future research should therefore include structured interviews with knowledge holders, youth and tourism actors; comparative analysis of recipe variants across settlements; and longitudinal monitoring of how digital catalogue affects real community practice.

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ECONOMIC DYNAMICS AND THE VALORISATION OF CULINARY HERITAGE

Lucia Căpățînă [6]
"Ion Creanga" State Pedagogical University of Chisinau

Abstract

This chapter analyses the economic dynamics associated with the valorisation of culinary heritage, with particular attention to how traditional food practices can be transformed into locally embedded economic value without losing their cultural meaning. The study approaches culinary heritage as a composite resource, combining recipes, techniques, agricultural products, rituals, hospitality practices, local narratives, and community institutions. Using a qualitative case-study design, supported by documentary analysis (Gagauz ethnic group from the Republic of Moldova), census-based demographic and economic evidence, project materials from the Culinary Trail initiative, and selected online sources, the chapter examines the potential of Gagauz cuisine to contribute to community-based sustainable tourism, local entrepreneurship, Culinary trail branding, and rural economic diversification. The analysis shows that Gagauz culinary heritage is already linked to identifiable economic actors, including households, guesthouses, ethno-touristic complexes, wineries, cafes, museums, local action groups, tourism offices, and digital platforms. At the same time, the transformation of heritage into market value remains fragile because of demographic pressures, limited professional training, uneven access to tourism markets, and the risk of commodification. The chapter argues that economic valorisation should not be understood only as commercialisation, but as the creation of a value chain that keeps benefits within the community, strengthens intergenerational transmission, supports small-scale businesses, and links Gagauzia to broader Danube Region culinary networks. The findings suggest that sustainable valorisation requires coordinated governance, digital visibility, quality standards, youth entrepreneurship, and direct links between local producers, hospitality providers, and public and cultural institutions.

Keywords: Gagauz ethnic group; culinary heritage; economic valorisation; culinary tourism; rural development; local economy; value chain; slow tourism; Danube Region

Introduction

Context and Background

Culinary heritage has increasingly become an important field of economic, cultural, and territorial development (Hall and Gössling 2016, chaps. 2–4; Richards 2021, chaps. 1–2). Traditional food is no longer perceived only as a private domestic practice or as a folkloric element of local identity, but also as a resource capable of generating income, employment, visitor experiences, and place-based branding. In rural and peripheral regions, this process is particularly important because food heritage can connect small producers, family businesses, local festivals, restaurants, tourism

[6] capatina.lucia@upsc.md
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operators, museums, and digital platforms into a common system of value creation. The Danube Region provides a relevant framework for such an approach because of its cultural diversity, multi-ethnic history, and strong need for sustainable forms of rural tourism and local economic diversification.

The Gagauz ethnic group represents a significant case for analysing this relationship between heritage and economic dynamics. In the Republic of Moldova, the Gagauz population is concentrated mainly in the southern part of the country, including the Autonomous Territorial Unit (ATU) of Gagauzia. According to the 2024 Population and Housing Census materials, 97,205 persons declared Gagauz ethnicity, representing around 4.0% of the total population; of these, 41,360 lived in urban areas and 55,845 in rural areas (Census 2024). This demographic structure is relevant for economic valorisation because the living core of Gagauz culinary heritage remains strongly connected to rural households, agricultural products, family rituals, and local hospitality.

The economic potential of Gagauz cuisine is already visible in several forms: ethno-touristic complexes, wine-related experiences, village-based gastronomy, food and ethnographic festivals, private households involved in documentation and hosting, and growing digital dissemination through the Culinary Trail project. However, potential does not automatically become sustainable value. Heritage-based economic development requires careful coordination. Traditional dishes can be commercialised too quickly, simplified for visitors, separated from their community context, or captured by a limited number of actors. Therefore, this chapter analyses not only opportunities, but also the risks and governance conditions required for the respectful valorisation of Gagauz culinary heritage.

Research Problem

The central research problem addressed in this chapter is how Gagauz culinary heritage can be transformed into sustainable economic value while preserving authenticity, community ownership, and cultural meaning. Many rural tourism initiatives fail because they treat food as a marketable product without understanding the social systems that produce it (Hall and Gössling 2016, chaps. 2–4). In the Gagauz case, cuisine is inseparable from language, family knowledge, ritual practice, pastoral and agricultural history, local spices, wine culture, and hospitality. When these dimensions are ignored, valorisation can become superficial and economically fragile.

At the same time, keeping heritage only within households may also limit its future viability. Younger generations often leave rural communities or pursue employment outside traditional sectors. The 2024 Census data indicate that only 43% of Gagauz people aged 15–64 were employed (Census 2024). These figures suggest that heritage valorisation may play a role in activating local opportunities, but only if it is connected to training, entrepreneurship, seasonal employment, services, and tourism value chains.

Aim and Specific Objectives

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the economic dynamics and valorisation pathways of Gagauz culinary heritage as a community-based resource for sustainable tourism and local development. The specific objectives are:

- Conceptualise Gagauz culinary heritage as an economic and cultural asset.

- Identify the main social and economic actors involved in its valorisation.
- Examine the role of gastronomy, wine, digital cataloguing, and tourism routes in generating local value.
- Interpret selected demographic and economic data relevant to the Gagauz community.
- Assess risks related to commodification, uneven benefit distribution, and institutional fragmentation.
- Formulate recommendations for a sustainable, community-oriented model of culinary heritage valorisation.

Context and Background

Theoretical Background

The theoretical basis of this chapter combines several perspectives: culinary heritage studies, sustainable tourism, cultural economy, slow tourism, rural development, and heritage governance. Traditional food has been widely recognised as a component of local identity and as a tourist attraction in rural areas. Bessière argues that traditional food and cuisine can contribute to local development when they are embedded in territorial narratives and community practices (Bessière 1998, 21–34). In a similar direction, studies on food tourism emphasise that food experiences shape destination identity, visitor satisfaction, and local economic opportunities (Ellis et al. 2018, 250–263).

However, heritage valorisation is not neutral. Timothy underlines that heritage cuisines can be affected by commodification, whereby cultural practices are adapted to market expectations and risk losing authenticity (Timothy 2015). This concern is directly relevant for Gagauz cuisine. Dishes such as *“Don kaurma”, “Bulgur”, “Gözleme”, “Kabaklı”, “Sütleș”* carry social meanings that may be weakened if they are reduced to standardised restaurant items. Therefore, economic valorisation must be designed as a balanced process: it should generate income but also protect cultural specificity (Richards 2021, chap. 1–2).

The Culinary Trail initiative provides a useful operational framework for this discussion. The project is designed to preserve and promote ethnic and local culinary heritage in the Danube Region, including the traditions of 30 ethnic groups, and explicitly links heritage with rural tourism, local economies, job creation, social innovation, digital cataloguing, transnational culinary routes, food carts, riverboat concepts, demonstration centres, training, and policy hubs (https://culinarytrail.eu/). The project logic is strongly aligned with the idea that culinary heritage can become a development resource only when it is connected to governance, capacity building, digital tools, and market access.

Key Concepts

Culinary heritage becomes an economic asset when it is transformed into experiences, services, products, routes, events, and learning opportunities. This transformation can occur through restaurants and cafes, but also through less formal channels: family households, small producers, festivals, community kitchens, wineries, guesthouses, local museums, and participatory workshops. In this sense, a traditional dish is not simply a product. It is an entry point into a wider

value chain that includes ingredients, production knowledge, preparation technique, serving ritual, storytelling, place branding, and visitor interpretation.

The Gagauz case is especially appropriate for this approach because its cuisine reflects a combination of pastoral, agricultural, Balkan, Turkic, Moldovan, and regional influences. Public sources describe Gagauz cuisine as strongly connected with meat, dairy products, grains, pastries, sauces, and pepper-based seasonings etc. Discover Gagauzia also emphasises dishes such as *"Kabaklı", "Sarma", "Kurban bulguru"* (Gridina 2025; Discover Gagauzia 2020). These examples show that the economic value of Gagauz cuisine can be built around diversity rather than around one or two emblematic dishes.

From an economic perspective, such diversity is important because it allows the creation of several market segments: festive cuisine, family cooking workshops, bakery and pastry products, wine-food pairing, vegetarian or fasting dishes, pastoral meat products, seasonal vegetable dishes, and digital recipe content. This diversity can reduce dependence on a single tourist offer and can strengthen the resilience of local culinary businesses.

Data and Methodology

This chapter adopts a qualitative case-study approach, supported by selective quantitative evidence. The case-study method is suitable because the economic valorisation of culinary heritage is a complex process involving social relations, local institutions, businesses, cultural narratives, and project-based interventions (Yin 2017, chap. 1; Hall and Gössling 2016, chaps. 2–4). The chapter does not aim to produce a full econometric assessment of Gagauz culinary tourism; rather, it analyses the structure, opportunities, and constraints of a heritage-based economic system.

The research design is structured as an applied value-chain evaluation and spatial alignment analysis. The operational methodology moves beyond descriptive ethnography to examine how localised cultural resources convert into sustainable economic assets through a synchronised, multi-country digital platform.

Analysis

Demographic and economic background

The demographic scale of the Gagauz ethnic group is significant enough to support a distinct cultural economy, but not large enough to guarantee automatic market visibility. The census-based figure of 97,205 persons declaring Gagauz ethnicity indicates a clearly identifiable community, while the rural majority within the group highlights the importance of village-based traditions and local agriculture (Census 2024). Culinary heritage valorisation should therefore be viewed as part of rural development rather than only as a tourism niche.

The economic data are particularly relevant. For the population aged 15 and over, the Gagauz group included 78,753 persons, of whom 31,266 were in the labour force, 27,282 were employed, and 3,984 were unemployed. In percentage terms, the employment share was 34%. Among the

working-age population aged 15–64, 59,872 persons were recorded, of whom 26,122 were employed (approximately 43%) (Census 2024). These figures do not measure the culinary economy directly, but they reveal the social context in which heritage-based economic initiatives would operate.

Regional data for ATU Gagauzia provide additional insight into local employment structure. The largest recorded sectors were public administration, education, health and social assistance (8,399 persons), followed by commerce, accommodation and food services (5,318 persons), and industry (4,339 persons) (Census 2024). The presence of employment in commerce, accommodation and food services is especially important for culinary heritage valorisation, because these sectors provide the direct interface between traditional food, visitors, and markets.

Occupational data also support this interpretation: in ATU Gagauzia, 5,171 persons were classified as workers in services and commerce, 4,161 as skilled workers and assimilated occupations, 2,133 as managers or senior officials, 5,494 as specialists, and 556 as skilled workers in agriculture, forestry, aquaculture, fishery and fishing (Census 2024). This occupational structure suggests that the region already has human resources in service, management, specialist, and skilled labour categories that could be mobilised for gastronomy, tourism, training, digital promotion, and small-scale entrepreneurial models.

Households, Local Producers and Small Businesses

For economic valorisation, the selection of dishes should be broader than the most frequently cited examples. A sustainable culinary offer should include everyday food, festive meals, fasting dishes, pastry products, sauces, marinades, wine-pairing products, and ritual food. Following the documentation study visit in April 2025, 20 units of culinary heritage relating to the Gagauz ethnic group were integrated into the Culinary Trail digital catalogue (https://culinarytrail.eu/). As a result, two important economic layers were identified: households and small businesses.

The first economic layer of Gagauz culinary heritage is the household. Many recipes are preserved in family settings, where knowledge is transmitted through practice rather than written manuals. The April 2025 field documentation process explicitly included private households and food service institutions in localities across ATU Gagauzia. It recorded dishes, ingredients, preparation techniques, photo and video materials, and local narratives, with the purpose of including them in a digital catalogue for preservation, valorisation, and promotion.

From an economic point of view, this household-based layer is essential because it can support micro-entrepreneurship. Private households may host cooking demonstrations, tastings, workshops, or small groups of visitors. They can supply local products to guesthouses or restaurants, participate in festivals, or become part of a certified network of culinary heritage ambassadors. This does not mean that every household should become a business. Rather, the objective is to create optional pathways for income generation while respecting the capacity and preferences of local residents.

Small local businesses are the second layer. Cafes, guesthouses, ethno-tourism complexes, wineries, guesthouses, and restaurants can transform culinary heritage into structured visitor experiences. The field documentation refers to places such as Cafe Colos in Svetlii, Gagauz Sofrasi Ethno-tourism complex in Congaz, the Ethno-estate of Petr Petkovich in Joltai (Culinary Trail 2024). The Transnational Action Plan for the Gagauz community also identifies restaurants, guesthouses,

and tourism providers as key actors capable of offering authentic Gagauz culinary experiences, organising events and festivals, and developing tourism packages.

Rather than treating traditional dishes and local wine as independent items, experience design under the project framework treats them as an integrated, co-dependent asset. Gagauzia possesses a unique geographical advantage here: its distinctive, heavy pastoral dishes naturally match the robust organoleptic profiles of reds and whites produced in the Valul lui Traian wine region of Southern Moldova. When applied to the primary Gagauz culinary repertoire documented for video dissemination, the pairing framework generates structured tourism products: for example the Pastoral & Red Wine Circuit – "K*uzu chorbasi*" (lamb soup) and slow-cooked "*Don Kaurma*" (from sheep meat) are high-fat, intensely flavourful dishes pairs with full-bodied local red varietals—such as Saperavi, Fetească Neagră, or Cabernet Sauvignon from partners like Vinuri de Comrat or Novak Winery—where wine tannins cut through the richness of the meat, elevating a standard meal into a premium gastronomic event.

By integrating these specific pairings into local hospitality, small businesses move away from low-margin commercialisation and tap into the lucrative enogastronomic tourism market, significantly increasing visitor spending per capita.

These examples demonstrate that the economic value of Gagauz cuisine lies in its capacity to support differentiated experiences: "K*uzu chorbasi*" can be positioned as part of pastoral and lamb-based food culture; "*Don Kaurma*" can be interpreted through festive, ritual, and pastoral traditions. Experience design is crucial. Visitors rarely travel only for a dish; they travel for a story, a place, a host, and a memorable encounter. A successful Gagauz culinary product should combine several elements: explanation of the dish name in Gagauz, demonstration of preparation technique, use of local ingredients, connection to family or ritual context, tasting, photo/video documentation, and links to other local attractions such as museums, churches, wineries, craft workshops, or natural landscapes.

Transnational Culinary Trails

The Culinary Trail project explicitly supports transnational culinary trails, green mobility options, multimedia experiences, and the connection of isolated culinary products into a transnational brand. A route can connect villages, households, restaurants, museums, and wineries into a coherent visitor itinerary.

The Culinary Trail platform provides an active, digital, and geo-referenced ecosystem through its Transnational Trails map (Culinary Trail 2026). This infrastructure explicitly connects individual Units of Culinary Heritage from different countries, allowing local and ethnic traditions to be integrated into a seamless cross-regional visitor journey.

For ATU Gagauzia, this functional framework solves the challenge of geographic dispersion because culinary heritage sites are dispersed across several localities. Instead of attempting to build an independent, isolated route, local hotspots—such as the ethno-estate in Joltai or Cafe Colos in Svetlii—are onboarded directly onto the platform as verified Units of Culinary Heritage or partner restaurants.

Furthermore, this alignment allows the region to tap into sustainable tourism flows by physically linking Gagauzia's culinary sites to green mobility networks. The platform maps these heritage points alongside major European cycling infrastructure, such as the EuroVelo networks passing

through the broader Danube Region (e.g., EuroVelo 6 and EuroVelo 11). By embedding Gagauz gastronomy into this map, independent travellers, food enthusiasts, and cultural explorers can easily plan eco-friendly itineraries that naturally weave through the Bugeac steppe, creating immediate visibility and market access for rural producers.

Besides that, one of the proposal included in the Transnational Action Plan for the Gagauz community is the extension of culinary tourism routes and cross-border packages, including mapping of Gagauz villages, culinary hotspots and heritage sites across Moldova and Ukraine, creating a calendar of significant events, developing packages with tastings, workshops, guided visits and accommodation, establishing partnerships with restaurants and guesthouses, and promoting routes digitally through regional tourism boards. This is a practical framework for transforming scattered heritage assets into a structured economic system.

Digital Catalogue and Market Visibility

Digitalisation is not a secondary activity; it is one of the main economic instruments of heritage valorisation. A traditional dish documented only in a local household remains culturally valuable, but its market reach is limited. When the same dish is recorded through photos, video, ingredient lists, narratives, geolocation, and multilingual description, it becomes part of a digital asset base.

The Culinary Trail project also identifies digital cataloguing as a key activity, including recipes, techniques, and cultural narratives (Culinary Trail 2026). This digital layer can generate economic effects in several ways: increasing visibility, supporting tour operators, helping restaurants build menus, providing educational materials, attracting diaspora interest, and allowing small businesses to be discovered by visitors before travel.

At the same time, digital visibility must be managed carefully. A digital catalogue should not expose community knowledge without consent or benefit sharing. It should include clear attribution, local contacts where appropriate, quality standards, and mechanisms for updating content. Digital heritage should not replace live transmission; it should support it by directing attention and income toward local actors.

Several mechanisms for economic valorisation were identified. The matrix proposed for Gagauz culinary heritage valorisation may also be applied to other ethnic groups (tab. 1). Market visibility is one of the economic functions of the proposed mechanisms.

Table 1. Main economic valorisation mechanisms for Gagauz culinary heritage

Valorisation mechanism	**Main economic function**	**Typical stakeholders**
Household-based experiences	Small-scale income, direct storytelling, intergenerational transmission	Families, local cooks, village hosts
Restaurants and guesthouses	Structured visitor services, menu development, repeatable experiences	Cafes, guesthouses, ethno-tourism complexes
Wine-food pairing	Higher-value tourism packages and territorial branding	Wineries, restaurants, tour operators
Digital catalogue and videos	Market visibility, interpretation, searchable heritage content	Project partners, digital platform managers, local contributors
Festivals and events	Temporary markets, public visibility, seasonal tourism	Municipalities, NGOs, cultural houses, local producers
Training and certification	Entrepreneurship, quality control, employability	Schools, universities, tourism bodies, mentors

Training, Youth Entrepreneurship and MUNDUS Franchise Model

A sustainable culinary economy requires standardised skills that meet the requirements of international tourism markets. Traditional knowledge alone is not sufficient for operating a modern tourism product. To bridge this gap, the valorisation of Gagauz culinary heritage should be structurally integrated into the MUNDUS Transnational Franchise and Training Framework developed under the Culinary Trail project. Rather than developing isolated, uncoordinated local courses, ATU Gagauzia can adopt the operational standards established by the flagship MUNDUS Demonstration and Training Centre. This allows local hubs (such as a partner facility at "Ion Creanga" State Pedagogical University) to function as decentralised nodes of the MUNDUS network.

Training is especially important because the census data indicate that a large share of the Gagauz population aged 15 and over is outside the labour force (Census 2024). Culinary heritage cannot solve structural labour-market challenges alone, but it can create flexible, small-scale opportunities for youth, women, seasonal workers, and rural households. For example, certified local guides could combine food interpretation with village tours; young entrepreneurs could develop small product lines based on marinades, sauces, pastries, or dried herbs; digital creators could produce multilingual content; and local cooks could become instructors in demonstration workshops. Local value chains should be designed to retain economic benefits in the community. This means linking farmers, livestock producers, gardeners, cheese producers, wineries, households, restaurants, guesthouses, museums, and tour operators. If ingredients are imported and profits leave the community, culinary tourism becomes weakly connected to local development.

If ingredients, labour, knowledge, and storytelling remain local, the same dish can generate multiple layers of value:

I. A restaurant can sell dishes, but a route can connect restaurants with villages, museums, wineries, producers, and festivals.
II. A recipe can be documented, but a digital catalogue can transform it into a searchable and marketable cultural asset.
III. A local festival can attract visitors, but a festival calendar connected to tour operators and accommodation can create a stronger seasonal economy.

Festivals, Events and Seasonal Economies

Festivals and events represent a dynamic mechanism for the economic valorisation of culinary heritage, functioning as temporary market accelerators that compress local supply chains and maximise community visibility (Richards 2021, chap. 1–2). Within the structural architecture of the Culinary Trail ecosystem, these public activations are systematically integrated into the broader Unit of Culinary Heritage concept. Empirically, 35 out of the 724 documented units recorded within the Culinary Trail digital catalogue fall explicitly under this event-based category (Culinary Trail 2026).

Field assessments confirm that every participating ethnic group identified these seasonal milestones as vital links within the local economic value chain. The economic impact is dual-layered:

- *Direct income generation:* Events generate immediate cash injections into the micro-economy through direct-to-consumer food sales, increased occupancy for rural accommodations, localised transport logistics, artisanal crafts commerce, and community-led guiding services.
- *Indirect asset appreciation:* Beyond immediate transactional revenue, festivals cultivate long-term economic value by strengthening the territorial destination image, capturing media attention, establishing distinct regional brands, and creating sustained consumer interest that drives repeat visits.

However, data indicate that event-based valorisation remains structurally vulnerable if treated as isolated occurrences. A festival that takes place only once a year can generate short-term financial spikes and promote heritage visibility, but it cannot sustain long-term economic resilience. For seasonal economies to meaningfully mitigate the rural employment deficits, they must be structurally anchored to year-round operational systems. This requires linking transient public events directly to permanent culinary routes, continuously accessible digital catalogue content, ongoing professional upskilling programmes, and established local brick-and-mortar hospitality businesses.

Key Findings

Clearly Structured Main Insights

The analysis leads to several key findings. The main one is that sustainable economic returns depend on a coordinated network rather than isolated businesses. True local impact is achieved by linking micro-level rural households directly with small guesthouses, local agricultural producers, and regional craft networks. Other key findings are:

a. Culinary Experience Design - transitioning from simple food service to premium experience design unlocks higher tourist margins. Coupling heavy, traditional pastoral dishes (e.g. *Don kaurma*, *Kuzu chorbasi*) with the robust profiles of southern Valul lui Traian regional wines transforms basic meals into high-yield tourist products.
b. Digital and Spatial Integration - leveraging the Culinary Trail platform overcomes geographic dispersion by mapping isolated heritage points directly alongside Danube Region green mobility networks (Culinary Transnational Trails), immediately intercepting slow-tourism traveller flows.
c. Socioeconomic activation via the MUNDUS Franchise Network - implementing the standardised MUNDUS franchise chain serves as a direct commercial catalyst for local communities. Onboarding individual rural hospitality nodes into this cross-border brand network provides youth and women outside the formal labour force with ready-to-operate business models, certified culinary standards, and direct integration into a structured regional restaurant economy.
d. Although festivals and seasonal events act as powerful market accelerators (comprising 35 of the 724 catalogue units), they remain economically fragile in isolation. Long-term rural resilience requires anchoring these transient events to permanent culinary trails and brick-and-mortar hospitality businesses.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

The economic valorisation of culinary heritage across peripheral and rural regions provides a strategic pathway for community-based development, territorial branding, and sustainable tourism. When traditional gastronomy is approached not as a static cultural artefact, but as a composite resource—integrating localised agricultural production, family narratives, and specialised hospitality practices—it can effectively drive economic diversification.

The valorisation of Gagauz culinary heritage within the Culinary Trail framework offers a viable pathway for rural economic diversification and local entrepreneurship. By transitioning from basic food service to high-value culinary experience design—such as pairing traditional pastoral dishes with regional Valul lui Traian wines—and integrating these assets into transnational digital platforms, the region can effectively capture slow-tourism market segments. Ultimately, transforming culinary heritage into sustainable economic value relies on shifting away from isolated business models toward a fully coordinated network that links rural households, local agricultural producers, and public institutions into a single, cohesive ecosystem.

Limitations

While the integration of traditional gastronomy into regional value chains presents clear economic opportunities, several operational challenges and socio-structural risks must be carefully considered:

a. *Commodification and cultural erosion:* Fast-paced commercialisation risks oversimplifying complex ethnic recipes and ritual dishes, leading to a loss of authenticity and community ownership to satisfy standardised tourist preferences.
b. *Economic inequality and capture:* There is a recurring vulnerability where large-scale tour operators or centralised entities capture the majority of market benefits, leaving the primary heritage bearers—micro-scale rural households—economically marginalised.
c. *Seasonal and structural isolation:* Niche culinary events and local festivals often create short-term financial spikes rather than long-term resilience, remaining highly vulnerable to off-season inactivity if they lack permanent brick-and-mortar integration.
d. *Digital and demographic dependency:* The long-term viability of these models is heavily reliant on continuous digital platform maintenance and is inherently threatened by rural depopulation, which disrupts the intergenerational transmission of culinary knowledge.

Recommendations for Further Research

To transform these identified cultural assets into resilient, long-term economic drivers, stakeholders should implement the following strategic interventions:

- Build multi-sectoral networks that link local farmers, artisanal producers, guesthouses, and regional tourism offices under shared quality-standard labels to ensure inclusive growth.

- Adopt Standardised Network Franchises by deploying ready-to-operate business frameworks, such as the MUNDUS franchise model, to equip marginalised demographics, rural youth, and women with clear operational and culinary standards.
- Connect temporary food festivals and seasonal markets directly to year-round culinary trails, permanent hospitality structures, and ongoing training programmes.
- Align Digital Mapping with Green mobility. Optimise regional visibility by embedding geo-referenced digital catalogue entries directly into Culinary transnational trails and other established European slow-tourism infrastructure, such as the EuroVelo cycling route network.

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PARTICIPATORY STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT FOR THE PROTECTION AND PROMOTION OF MINORITY CULINARY HERITAGE IN THE DANUBE REGION

Janja Lozar[7]
School of Advanced Social Studies in Nova Gorica

Abstract

Culinary heritage is a key element of cultural identity and has become an increasingly important element of sustainable tourism and regional development policies. Minority culinary traditions are a particularly precious and threatened component of the intangible cultural heritage of the Danube Region, endangered by globalisation, demographic change, rural depopulation, and the lack of institutional visibility. In this chapter, we describe the participatory process of developing the Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Minority Culinary Heritage in the Danube Region in the context of the Culinary Trail project. This chapter reviews the implementation of the CRIPREDE methodology on the basis of current approaches to culinary heritage governance and participatory policymaking, combining stakeholder-based SWOT analysis, peer-review workshops, policy co-creation sessions, and feasibility testing. Strategy development is conceived as a governance process rather than an administrative procedure, through which diverse actors negotiated priorities, reconciled institutional viewpoints and transformed cultural knowledge into implementable strategic actions. The results indicate that the protection of minority culinary heritage requires integrated approaches that simultaneously address cultural preservation, social participation, economic sustainability, and cross-border institutional coordination.

Keywords: culinary heritage; minority heritage; Danube Region; participatory governance; cultural tourism; intangible heritage; strategy development; CRIPREDE methodology; SWOT analysis; sustainable tourism

Introduction

Beyond its material dimension, culinary heritage encompasses social practices, intergenerational knowledge transfer, ritual meanings, and collective memories connected to food preparation and consumption (Milovanović Rodić et al. 2024). UNESCO (2003) has acknowledged the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, including gastronomic traditions, as part of broader efforts to preserve cultural diversity and strengthen social cohesion.

Within the Danube Region, culinary traditions reflect centuries of cultural interaction, migration, coexistence, and exchange among diverse ethnic and minority groups (Grubor et al. 2022). These traditions represent not only local food practices but also symbolic expressions of belonging, territorial identity, and cultural continuity. However, globalisation, demographic change, urbanisation, depopulation of rural areas, and increasing standardisation of food systems have

[7] janja.lozar@fuds.si
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placed many traditional culinary practices at risk. Minority culinary traditions are particularly vulnerable due to limited institutional visibility, fragmented representation, and insufficient integration into mainstream heritage and tourism policies (Kihlgren Grandi 2023; Grubor et al. 2022).

The preservation of culinary heritage therefore requires a strategic approach that integrates cultural, social, and economic dimensions. From a cultural perspective, safeguarding culinary heritage contributes to preserving collective memory, local knowledge, and cultural resilience. Traditional foods and food-related practices function as expressions of cultural identity and strengthen community cohesion (UNESCO 2003).

From a social perspective, culinary heritage creates opportunities for participation, intergenerational exchange, and community engagement. Food-related practices remain central to family gatherings, festivals, rituals, and local celebrations, reinforcing both personal and collective identities (Bortolotto and Ubertazzi 2018).

Culinary heritage also possesses significant economic potential. Culinary tourism increasingly represents a mechanism for supporting local economies, creating employment opportunities, strengthening local supply chains, and encouraging sustainable regional development (Rachão et al. 2019; Silva, Ramazanova, and Freitas 2025; Vuksanović et al. 2024).

In this context, safeguarding culinary heritage cannot be reduced to cultural preservation alone. It also requires governance mechanisms capable of coordinating diverse stakeholders, balancing preservation and development objectives, and translating cultural assets into sustainable socio-economic opportunities (Niković et al. 2024; Krüger et al. 2024).

Structured strategic planning becomes particularly important in transnational contexts such as the Danube Region, where multiple institutional systems, territorial specificities, and minority communities intersect (Iaione, De Nictolis, and Santagati 2022). The Culinary Trail project emerged within this context as an initiative aimed at preserving and promoting the culinary heritage of the Danube Region while simultaneously creating new economic opportunities through slow culinary tourism. The project focused specifically on the culinary traditions of minority and ethnic groups, recognising them as an integral component of the region's cultural diversity and tourism potential. The research identified 30 traditionally present and historically autochthonous ethnic groups, alongside five recently established migrant communities whose culinary practices also contribute to the contemporary cultural landscape of the Danube Region.

To support the development of a comprehensive strategic framework, the project combined secondary research with participatory methodologies designed to collect primary stakeholder perspectives. A central component of this process was the application of the CRIPREDE (Developing Competitive Knowledge-based Regional Economies in Europe 2007) methodology (CRIPREDE 2007), which integrated stakeholder-based SWOT analysis, peer-review workshops, policy co-creation sessions, and feasibility testing procedures. SWOT analysis, understood as a strategic management instrument for assessing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, provided the initial diagnostic framework for evaluating the current state of minority culinary heritage governance and identifying strategic priorities.

This chapter analyses the participatory strategy-building process used to develop the Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Minority Culinary Heritage in the Danube Region. Rather than approaching strategy development as a purely administrative exercise, the chapter conceptualises it as a participatory governance process through which diverse actors negotiated priorities,

evaluated institutional capacities, and constructed a shared strategic framework for safeguarding culinary heritage (Krüger et al. 2024; Iaione, De Nictolis, and Santagati 2022).

Culinary Heritage Governance and Participatory Strategy-Making

Culinary Heritage as a Transforming Social Field

Culinary heritage is increasingly understood not only as a repository of traditional knowledge but also as a transforming social field shaped by tourism development, regional branding, sustainability agendas, institutional policies, and market dynamics. Food traditions function simultaneously as cultural symbols, tourism resources, and instruments of territorial differentiation. Within the Danube regional context, culinary heritage is additionally influenced by cross-border governance frameworks, macro-regional development strategies, and regional policy instruments that shape how cultural meanings, identities, and development priorities are negotiated across borders. Within this broader policy and governance environment, minority culinary traditions emerge as particularly important carriers of local identity, cultural continuity, and historical memory, while also reflecting the evolving socio-political and economic dynamics of the region. Approaching culinary heritage as a social field provides an analytical perspective for examining how these cultural meanings and practices are continuously negotiated and transformed through broader social, political, economic, and institutional processes (Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Cepoi 2020).

Culinary heritage encompasses the historical, cultural, and social significance of food within a community, including cooking techniques, recipes, ingredients, rituals, and food-related social practices that collectively express cultural identity and social memory (Bortolotto and Ubertazzi 2018; Zocchi et al. 2021). Culinary heritage contains both tangible and intangible dimensions, with tangible elements comprising recipes, traditional ingredients, utensils, and physical products, and intangible dimensions including oral transmission, culinary knowledge, rituals, and social practices associated with food preparation and consumption, but also community-based knowledge, place attachment, memory, and intergenerational transmission (Bortolotto and Ubertazzi 2018; Zocchi et al. 2021).

The growing interest in gastronomic tourism has transformed culinary heritage into an important economic and developmental resource. Culinary tourism is increasingly recognised as a mechanism for attracting visitors seeking authentic cultural experiences, strengthening local economies, and promoting regional distinctiveness. Traditional cuisines have become integrated into destination branding strategies, cultural festivals, and rural development initiatives (Mušič et al. 2021; Radosavljević and Kuletin Ćulafić 2019; Milovanović Rodić et al. 2024).

Nevertheless, globalisation and tourism commercialisation pose significant challenges for heritage preservation. Standardisation of food production, demographic shifts, and changing consumption patterns may contribute to the loss of traditional culinary knowledge and local specificity (Zocchi et al. 2021). Minority cuisines are especially vulnerable because they often remain marginal within dominant national heritage narratives and may lack robust institutional support structures (Kihlgren Grandi 2023; Grubor et al. 2022).

In this sense, culinary heritage can be understood as a transforming social field in which cultural actors, tourism institutions, policymakers, local communities, and market actors negotiate

meanings, values, and development priorities (Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Cepoi 2020). At the same time, its development depends on the capacity of regional actors to coordinate resources, build strategic connections, and align diverse interests within territorial governance systems (Fric, O'Gorman, and Rončević 2023; Rončević et al. 2023).

The preservation of minority culinary heritage, therefore, depends not only on safeguarding cultural practices but also on coordinating institutional support, public visibility, and sustainable development mechanisms. This perspective aligns with research that conceptualises heritage governance as a multi-actor and collaborative process rather than a purely protective endeavour (Iaione, De Nictolis, and Santagati 2022; Parasecoli and Rodriguez-Garcia 2023; Zocchi et al. 2021).

Within the Danube regional context, these governance dynamics are further shaped by cross-border institutional arrangements, macro-regional development strategies, and regional policy networks. Danube-region literature increasingly conceptualises regional development as a social field structured through institutions, actor networks, and shared cognitive frameworks, particularly within the SOFIA-inspired Social Fields Approach (Cepoi 2020; Rončević and Besednjak Valič 2019; Rončević, Modic, and Golob 2022). This perspective provides a useful theoretical and methodological lens for understanding how public authorities, civil society organisations, tourism actors, minority communities, and development institutions collectively shape heritage governance and transform culinary heritage into a strategic cultural and economic resource. In cross-border Danube contexts, these multilevel and multisector governance structures become central to safeguarding minority culinary heritage while simultaneously enabling regional branding, tourism development, and transnational cooperation.

Participatory Governance and Heritage Policy

Contemporary heritage governance increasingly emphasises participatory and collaborative approaches. Rather than relying exclusively on top-down protection, current research highlights the importance of involving local communities, minority groups, NGOs, researchers, and development actors in decision-making processes. Participatory governance approaches are especially important in the field of intangible cultural heritage due to deeply rooted heritage practices in everyday social life, local traditions, and community knowledge. Effective safeguarding therefore depends on the active involvement of the communities that create, preserve, and pass on culinary traditions across generations (Iaione, De Nictolis, and Santagati 2022).

Empirical studies show that participatory heritage governance contributes to stronger legitimacy, increased stakeholder ownership, and more sustainable implementation outcomes. Deliberative and co-creative approaches enable the integration of diverse perspectives, local experiences, and institutional capacities into shared policy frameworks, a pattern well documented across transnational contexts.

In cross-border settings such as the Danube Region, participatory governance mechanisms are even more critical due to institutional diversity, territorial fragmentation, and the multiplicity of actors involved. Minority culinary heritage governance requires coordination among local communities, municipalities, tourism organisations, NGOs, researchers, and regional policy institutions operating across national borders (Iaione, De Nictolis, and Santagati 2022).

Consequently, strategy-building processes should function not only as technical planning exercises but also as mechanisms for coordination, negotiation, and consensus-building among heterogeneous actors. The CRIPREDE-inspired approach—integrating stakeholder SWOT analysis, peer-review workshops, policy co-creation sessions, and feasibility testing—embodies a practical participatory governance toolkit aimed at producing an implementable strategy for safeguarding minority culinary heritage in transnational regions. Multinodal networks, multi-level governance structures, and collaborative policy instruments are essential for cross-border regeneration and cultural tourism development (Čolic et al. 2020).

Methodological Framework: The CRIPREDE Strategy Development Process

The CRIPREDE Methodological Approach

The strategy for the protection and promotion of minority culinary heritage in the Danube Region was developed using the CRIPREDE (CRIPREDE 2007) methodology, an iterative and participatory governance framework that integrates stakeholder consultation, strategic assessment, policy co-creation, and feasibility testing. The CRIPREDE approach was selected for its capacity to harmonise analytical evaluation with inclusive, multi-actor coordination across diverse institutional capacities, priorities, and expectations inherent in minority culinary heritage governance (Iaione, De Nictolis, and Santagati 2022). This approach treats strategy development as a continuous, dialogue-driven process that translates dispersed perspectives into coordinated strategic priorities suitable for cross-border contexts (Iaione, De Nictolis, and Santagati 2022).

The initial phase encompassed systematic secondary research and mapping of minority communities across the Danube Region. The research was conducted across 13 countries: Germany (Baden-Württemberg), Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, and Montenegro. This phase included the identification of autochthonous ethnic groups with a long-standing historical presence in the region, as well as the mapping of more recently established migrant communities and the existing cultural, institutional, and policy frameworks related to minority protection. The findings generated during this phase established the analytical foundation for the subsequent stages of the strategy-development process.

In the second phase, a transnational Strategy Working Group (SWG) was formed, composed of project partners, representatives of minority communities, policymakers, and thematic experts. The SWG functioned as the central coordination mechanism throughout the strategy-building process, ensuring representation of multiple territorial and institutional levels. This structure reflects governance literature that advocates multi-actor, cross-border coordination as essential for coherent heritage and tourism strategies in transnational regions (Čolic et al. 2020). The SWG facilitated alignment of aims across local, regional, and cross-border scales and provided a stable forum for negotiated priorities (Mušič et al. 2021; Milovanović Rodić et al. 2024).

In the following phase, the five Peer-to-Peer Review Workshops formed the core deliberative component of CRIPREDE process. Workshops progressively addressed SWOT analysis, policy discussions, thematic priorities, governance challenges, and feasibility assessment. Rather than serving solely as consultation events, these workshops embodied iterative, deliberative processes that enabled continual refinement of strategic priorities in light of stakeholder input and emerging

evidence. This mirrors established participatory planning practices that use iterative workshops to integrate diverse viewpoints into a coherent policy framework and to test feasibility across varied governance contexts (Iaione, De Nictolis, and Santagati 2022). In Danube Region settings, such iterative engagement is particularly valuable given institutional diversity and cross-border complexity.

The final phase synthesised workshop outputs, stakeholder recommendations, SWOT findings, and feasibility testing results into a coherent governance document. This phase operationalises participatory governance by converting deliberations into an implementable strategic framework with defined actions, responsibilities, timelines, and monitoring indicators. The emphasis on translating stakeholder knowledge into structured policy instruments reinforces the role of participatory governance in enabling coordinated, actionable, and context-responsive planning within cross-border environments (Iaione, De Nictolis, and Santagati 2022).

Stakeholder Mapping and Participation Structure

The participatory process involved multiple stakeholder groups representing different dimensions of culinary heritage governance.

Table 1: Stakeholder participation structure

Stakeholder group	**Strategic role**
Minority communities	Transmission of culinary knowledge and safeguarding needs
Policymakers	Institutional coordination and policy feasibility
Project partners: Researchers and regional development experts	Analytical and methodological support
Associated partners and other stakeholders: - NGOs and cultural associations - Tourism actors, - Local producers and HORECA sector	Valorisation and destination development, Advocacy and mediation Economic sustainability and implementation

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The inclusion of diverse stakeholder groups was considered essential for ensuring representativeness and legitimacy. Minority communities provided insights into everyday culinary practices, preservation challenges, and cultural significance, while institutional actors contributed perspectives related to policy implementation and administrative feasibility.

The transnational character of the Danube Region additionally required balancing regional differences and varying institutional contexts. The participatory structure therefore enabled dialogue between local experiences and broader regional policy frameworks.

SWOT Analysis as a Diagnostic Governance Tool

The SWOT analysis represented the first major participatory phase of the strategy-building process. The objective was not merely to identify general characteristics of minority culinary heritage but to diagnose structural conditions influencing its preservation, promotion, and development.

The SWOT process identified several strengths associated with minority culinary heritage, including strong local identities, rich culinary diversity, existing cultural routes, integration with tourism infrastructure, and family-based transmission of culinary practices.

At the same time, significant weaknesses were identified, particularly limited institutional visibility, fragmented representation of minority groups, insufficient documentation of culinary practices, rural depopulation, and poor intergenerational transfer of culinary knowledge.

Table 2: Main findings of the SWOT analysis

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
Rich culinary diversity	Weak institutional visibility
Strong cultural identity	Fragmented stakeholder coordination
Existing tourism infrastructure	Limited documentation
Intergenerational culinary traditions	Rural depopulation
Opportunities	**Threats**
Culinary tourism development	Globalisation and standardisation
EU heritage frameworks	Loss of traditional knowledge
Digital promotion	Commercialisation pressures
Cross-border cooperation	Social stigmatisation

Source: Authors' elaboration based on stakeholder workshops.

The SWOT analysis additionally identified opportunities related to digitalisation, sustainable tourism, green mobility, youth engagement, cross-border branding, and educational initiatives. Threats included cultural assimilation, outmigration, fast-food homogenisation, environmental instability, and stereotyping of minority cuisines.

The SWOT process functioned not only as a planning instrument but also as a mechanism for articulating shared perceptions of vulnerability, potential, and institutional capacity across stakeholder groups. The process therefore established the analytical backbone of the strategy and supported the formulation of strategic objectives and thematic priorities.

The workshops are best understood as deliberative coordination spaces that transform dispersed stakeholder perspectives into collectively negotiated strategic priorities. Deliberative formats in cultural heritage and gastronomy governance have been shown to strengthen cross-actor legitimacy and ownership of strategies, enhancing alignment across governance levels and sectors (policy, tourism, academia, civil society) (Parasecoli and Rodriguez-Garcia 2023). In the Danube Region context, such deliberation is aligned with broader findings that participatory processes improve policy coherence, foster legitimacy for heritage governance, and drive more integrated regional strategies that accommodate diverse institutional capacities. The cross-stakeholder negotiation dimension supports more coherent safeguarding and development pathways for intangible culinary heritage and related tourism activities.

Deliberative workshops support more inclusive representation of minority voices in regional tourism strategies, addressing potential gaps in stakeholder inclusion across hierarchical governance structures (Iaione, De Nictolis, and Santagati 2022; Sokka et al. 2021). By bringing minority representatives, policymakers and tourism stakeholders together, the process enabled different groups to articulate their concerns and priorities, identify common goals and develop practical solutions, thereby contributing to fairer, more widely accepted and more readily implementable decisions. The process thus aligns with contemporary understandings that participatory, deliberative governance arrangements can bridge gaps between heritage safeguarding and economic development objectives in tourism systems, while reinforcing regional coordination across levels and borders.

A key finding of the workshops is the uneven distribution of institutional capacities across the Danube Region. Some regions exhibit mature tourism infrastructures and established cultural initiatives, whereas others face resource constraints, weak institutional support, and limited visibility for minority culinary traditions. This finding is consistent with previous studies on regional governance, which show that regions often differ in their resources, institutional capacities, and development opportunities, highlighting the need for place-based approaches tailored to local conditions (Barca, McCann, and Rodríguez-Pose 2012).

Adaptive governance frameworks are repeatedly advocated as necessary to manage the trade-offs between preservation and development in culturally sensitive tourism contexts, particularly where cross-border and transnational dimensions overlap with local realities. The workshops' identification of capacity gaps thus supports calls for flexible governance arrangements that tailor interventions to local conditions while enabling cross-regional learning (Ottaviani et al. 2023).

Participants highlighted barriers to intergenerational knowledge transfer, noting that younger generations perceive traditional culinary practices as economically unviable or socially dated, especially in regions experiencing migration and demographic decline. Youth engagement and education have an important role in the long-term sustainability of intangible cultural heritage and culinary tourism ecosystems. The integration of culinary heritage into modern education, tourism products and entrepreneurial opportunities is regularly presented as a mechanism for maintaining its relevance among younger populations and catalysing new livelihoods related to intangible heritage. The workshop emphasis on education-aligned strategies aligns with best practices for sustaining culinary traditions within evolving tourism economies (Fakin Bajec 2019; Borcoman and Sorea 2023).

The workshops underscored the cross-border nature of many culinary traditions, ingredients, and food-related rituals that traverse state boundaries, calling for transnational safeguarding approaches rather than purely national interventions. This is consistent with UNESCO's framework for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, which recognises that many heritage elements are shared across national territories and encourages multinational cooperation, joint safeguarding initiatives, and transnational nominations for such elements (UNESCO 2003; UNESCO n.d.). Furthermore, studies on intangible heritage governance emphasise the importance of cross-border cooperation, shared inventories, and transnational networks in sustaining living heritage practices that extend beyond state boundaries. The Danube Region, with historical and cultural ties that predate contemporary borders, provides a particularly suitable context for governance mechanisms that complement national safeguarding strategies.

A central outcome of the peer-review process is the transformation of dispersed stakeholder perspectives into collectively negotiated strategic priorities. The deliberative format has been shown to strengthen stakeholder ownership of strategies and facilitate institutional coordination across governance levels—an effect documented in related contexts of regional cultural heritage and tourism development (Iaione, De Nictolis, and Santagati 2022). The peer-review process contributed to the development of strategic directions that sought to reconcile safeguarding and development objectives while promoting greater coherence across governance levels and national borders.

Overall, the peer-review workshops demonstrated the value of deliberative and participatory governance approaches in supporting the sustainable development of minority culinary heritage. By bringing together diverse stakeholders, the process helped reconcile heritage preservation and development goals, address regional capacity differences, strengthen knowledge transmission, promote cross-border cooperation, and build shared ownership of strategic priorities.

Policy Co-Creation and Feasibility Testing

Following the peer-review phase, policy co-creation workshops were organised with institutional actors and policymakers to transform the identified priorities into implementable strategic actions. Participatory design processes can operationalise stakeholder inputs into governance strategies for cultural heritage and gastronomy contexts (Ottaviani et al. 2023).

The workshops focused on evaluating proposed actions according to several feasibility dimensions: institutional feasibility; financial feasibility; administrative compatibility; stakeholder support; transnational applicability. Feasibility assessment has been described as a critical stage in strategy formation because it translates participatory aspirations into realistic governance measures and helps steer actions toward implementable outcomes (Ottaviani et al. 2023)

The feasibility assessment process led to the refinement of several proposed actions, ensuring greater alignment with existing institutional capacities, available funding mechanisms, and administrative frameworks.

Actions identified as “quick wins” included relatively low-cost initiatives such as digital promotion campaigns, culinary festivals, educational workshops, and creation of online databases documenting minority culinary traditions. Medium-term measures focused on institutional partnerships, tourism integration, branding strategies, and educational curricula, while long-term priorities included structural policy reforms, transnational governance coordination, and

establishment of sustainable funding mechanisms, reflecting common patterns in sustainability-oriented policy roadmapping (Ottaviani et al. 2023; Rachão et al. 2019).

This staged implementation logic strengthened the practical applicability of the strategy and reduced the risk of producing unrealistic or purely symbolic recommendations, which is broadly supported in policy co-creation literature emphasising phased action and institutional filtering mechanisms (Ottaviani et al. 2023). Feasibility testing therefore served as a mechanism for translating stakeholder aspirations into operational governance actions by assessing their compatibility with existing institutional, financial, and administrative conditions.

The co-creation process also strengthened alignment with broader international and regional policy frameworks, including the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, European Green Deal and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.

The integration of these frameworks served several purposes: first, to increase the institutional legitimacy of the strategy; second, to strengthen compatibility with existing European funding instruments and policy initiatives; and third, to embed minority culinary heritage within broader sustainability and regional development agendas, thereby increasing its visibility and policy relevance.

Results and Discussion

Identification of Strategic Priorities

The participatory process resulted in the identification of several interconnected strategic priorities for the protection and promotion of minority culinary heritage in the Danube Region. These priorities emerged through iterative consultation, stakeholder negotiation, SWOT synthesis, and feasibility validation.

The first strategic priority focused on safeguarding and documentation. Participants emphasised the urgent need to systematically collect recipes, oral histories, culinary practices, local ingredients, and food-related rituals before further loss occurs due to demographic changes, migration, and modernisation processes. Digital archiving, audiovisual documentation, and multilingual databases were identified as important tools for preserving culinary knowledge and increasing accessibility (Culinary Trail Strategy 2025; Del Soldato and Massari 2024).

The second strategic priority involved education and intergenerational transmission. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of strengthening knowledge transfer through schools, vocational programmes, community workshops, festivals, and family-based learning initiatives. Culinary heritage was viewed not only as a cultural resource but also as an educational instrument capable of strengthening local identity, intercultural understanding, and youth engagement.

A third priority addressed visibility and promotion. Minority culinary traditions often remain insufficiently represented within mainstream tourism and heritage narratives. Consequently, the strategy emphasised branding, digital promotion, culinary storytelling, and integration into regional tourism initiatives. Participants additionally stressed the importance of avoiding stereotypical representations of minority cultures and ensuring authentic community participation in promotional activities.

Another important priority concerned sustainable culinary tourism and local economic development. Stakeholders recognised culinary tourism as an opportunity for supporting rural economies, strengthening local supply chains, and increasing minority visibility while maintaining cultural authenticity. Slow tourism approaches, local food networks, short supply chains, and environmentally sustainable tourism models were therefore integrated into the strategic framework (Culinary Trail Strategy 2025).

The strategy also identified innovation and entrepreneurship as important governance dimensions. Participants emphasised the need to support minority entrepreneurs, family farms, traditional producers, and local food businesses through training programmes, mentoring, branding support, and access to funding opportunities. Entrepreneurship was understood as a mechanism for increasing the economic viability of traditional culinary practices while simultaneously encouraging adaptation to contemporary market conditions.

Finally, the strategy highlighted the importance of transnational cooperation and institutional coordination. Since many minority groups are present across multiple countries, cross-border collaboration was identified as essential for effective safeguarding and promotion. Participants repeatedly emphasised that isolated local initiatives frequently lack sufficient institutional support and long-term sustainability.

Strategic Framework and Governance Logic

The final strategic framework emerged as the result of several times mentioned iterative participatory governance processes. Rather than functioning solely as a policy document, the strategy established an operational governance architecture intended to coordinate minority culinary heritage preservation across multiple territorial, institutional, and cultural contexts.

The strategy is structured around a clearly articulated vision, mission, strategic objectives, guiding principles, implementation philosophy, and operational instruments. Its overarching vision positions the Danube Region as a globally recognised space of culinary diversity, intercultural cooperation, and sustainable development.

The mission further operationalises this vision through commitments to inclusion, empowerment, cultural sustainability, and regional cooperation. The governance logic of the strategy is built upon four interconnected strategic objectives:

- preservation and promotion of culinary heritage through intergenerational transmission and digital innovation,
- empowerment of minority communities through entrepreneurship and capacity-building,
- development of sustainable and inclusive culinary tourism,
- strengthening of transnational cooperation, policy frameworks, and funding mechanisms (Culinary Trail Strategy 2025).

These objectives were directly derived from the SWOT analysis and validated through stakeholder consultations. Importantly, they reflect a balance between cultural safeguarding and socio-economic development. Culinary heritage was therefore framed not only as a cultural asset requiring preservation but also as a potential driver of sustainable tourism, community resilience, and regional development.

The strategy additionally established seven priority thematic areas functioning as operational governance domains:

1. Heritage visibility and transmission
2. Inclusive participation and minority empowerment
3. Culinary tourism and sustainable development
4. Education, training, and tacit knowledge
5. Digitalisation and promotion
6. Policy alignment and funding access
7. Innovation and entrepreneurship (Culinary Trail Strategy 2025)

These thematic areas represent more than thematic policy categories. They function as strategic coordination domains through which diverse stakeholder priorities were translated into implementable intervention areas. Each thematic area incorporates specific strategic actions validated through feasibility testing and stakeholder consensus-building.

Table 3: Strategic thematic areas and governance functions

Priority thematic area	**Governance function**
Heritage visibility and transmission	Safeguarding and intergenerational continuity
Inclusive participation and minority empowerment	Social inclusion and community engagement
Culinary tourism and sustainable development	Economic valorisation and sustainable tourism
Education, training, and tacit knowledge	Knowledge transfer and skills development
Digitalisation and promotion	Visibility and digital preservation
Policy alignment and funding access	Institutional integration and resource mobilisation
Innovation and entrepreneurship	Economic diversification and adaptive development

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Culinary Trail strategy.

One of the most innovative elements of the strategy is the introduction of Transnational Action Plans (TAPs) as operational implementation instruments. Unlike traditional national strategies, the TAPs are not territorially organised according to state boundaries but instead structured around specific ethnic and minority groups.

This approach reflects a minority-centred governance logic recognising that many ethnic communities in the Danube Region transcend national borders and share common cultural traditions across multiple countries. The TAP system therefore combines local specificity with transnational coordination.

The strategy foresees the development of 33 TAPs:

- 30 TAPs for traditionally present autochthonous ethnic groups,
- one common TAP for migrant communities,
- one TAP addressing pandemic-related resilience,
- one TAP addressing war-related scenarios and displacement impacts.

This structure demonstrates an adaptive governance approach capable of integrating both historical heritage preservation and emerging socio-political realities.

Another important governance mechanism established through the strategy is the Strategy Working Group (SWG), which functions as the central facilitation and coordination body responsible for maintaining strategic continuity, stakeholder dialogue, monitoring, and future adaptation (Culinary Trail Strategy 2025).

The SWG represents a multi-level governance mechanism connecting:

- local communities,
- minority representatives,
- project partners,
- policymakers,
- NGOs,
- tourism stakeholders,
- researchers and experts.

The strategy therefore institutionalises participatory coordination beyond the initial consultation process. This institutional continuity is particularly important in transnational governance contexts where implementation frequently fails due to fragmentation between governance levels and stakeholder groups (Besednjak Valič, Džajić Uršič, and Lozar 2026)

The implementation philosophy embedded within the strategy further reinforces its adaptive governance orientation. The strategy explicitly conceptualises implementation as an iterative and evolving process rather than a fixed policy blueprint.

This adaptive approach is based on several principles:

- bottom-up stakeholder engagement,
- policy flexibility,
- participatory validation,
- continuous monitoring,
- responsiveness to changing regional conditions.

The strategy additionally aligns with broader European and regional policy frameworks, including the European Green Deal, the European Agenda for Culture, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), Smart Specialisation Strategies, LEADER, and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

This policy alignment serves multiple governance functions:

- strengthening institutional legitimacy,
- facilitating access to funding mechanisms,
- supporting policy integration,
- embedding culinary heritage within broader sustainable development agendas.

Crucially, the strategy acknowledges that the governance of minority culinary heritage cannot be based solely on preservation frameworks. Rather, safeguards are mainstreamed through digitalisation, entrepreneurship, sustainable tourism, green mobility, innovation and community-based development.

At the same time, the strategy repeatedly stresses the importance of authenticity, inclusion, and minority empowerment to prevent excessive commodification and stereotyping of minority culinary traditions.

Implementation Challenges and Institutional Constraints

Despite the positive outcomes of the participatory strategy-building process, several implementation challenges were identified throughout the workshops and feasibility-testing procedures.

One important challenge concerns uneven institutional capacity across the Danube Region. Different countries and regions possess varying levels of administrative support, financial resources, tourism infrastructure, and policy integration related to culinary heritage. While some regions already possess established gastronomic branding and tourism systems, others continue to struggle with weak institutional visibility and insufficient support for minority communities (Culinary Trail Strategy 2025).

Another major challenge involves maintaining long-term stakeholder engagement. Participatory governance processes require continuous coordination, communication, and institutional support to remain effective beyond the initial project phase. Stakeholders repeatedly emphasised that many previous heritage initiatives failed because of insufficient continuity, fragmented governance, or lack of sustained funding mechanisms (Culinary Trail Strategy 2025).

The transnational nature of the strategy additionally creates coordination complexity. Differences in legal frameworks, cultural policies, minority-rights legislation, tourism governance structures, and funding accessibility may complicate implementation across participating countries. Coordinating actions among multiple governance levels therefore requires flexible and adaptive institutional mechanisms (Culinary Trail Strategy 2025).

Participants also identified tensions between safeguarding authenticity and promoting tourism development. While culinary tourism creates important economic opportunities, excessive commercialisation risks simplifying, stereotyping, or commodifying minority culinary traditions. Stakeholders therefore emphasised the importance of community ownership, ethical representation, and participatory storytelling approaches that preserve cultural integrity (Culinary Trail Strategy 2025).

However, the mobilisation of food as heritage also creates governance risks. Heritage protection may prioritise institutional recognition, marketable authenticity or legal categorisation, to the detriment of the lived, adaptive and community-based nature of culinary practices. This tension is particularly relevant for minority culinary heritage, where tourism-led visibility can support safeguarding but may also simplify complex food practices into consumable identity markers (Lixinski 2018; Silva, Ramazanova, and Freitas 2025).

Another important issue concerns generational continuity. Many custodians of traditional culinary knowledge belong to older generations, while younger populations often migrate toward urban areas or perceive traditional culinary activities as economically unsustainable. Without targeted educational and entrepreneurial support mechanisms, there is a risk of losing substantial portions of intangible culinary knowledge (Culinary Trail Strategy 2025).

Feasibility testing additionally demonstrated that even highly desirable actions may face implementation constraints due to:

- regional disparities in governance capacity,
- unequal access to funding,
- infrastructural limitations,
- insufficient administrative coordination,

- varying levels of minority recognition within national policy frameworks (Culinary Trail Strategy 2025).

These findings demonstrate that participatory strategy-building should be understood as an ongoing governance process rather than a single planning exercise. Successful implementation depends not only on strategic design but also on long-term institutional cooperation, continuous stakeholder participation, adaptive learning mechanisms, and sustained political support (Rachão et al. 2019; Parasecoli and Rodriguez-Garcia 2023).

The strategy therefore adopts an adaptive and iterative approach to governance, recognising that culinary heritage operates within a dynamic social environment characterised by evolving stakeholder interests, institutional arrangements, and development priorities (Parasecoli and Rodriguez-Garcia 2023). This allows the strategy to function as a living document capable of evolving alongside changing social, political, environmental, and economic conditions in the Danube Region.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the participatory process through which the Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Minority Culinary Heritage in the Danube Region was developed within the Culinary Trail project.

The findings demonstrate that safeguarding culinary heritage requires integrated approaches that simultaneously address cultural preservation, social participation, economic sustainability, and institutional coordination. Minority culinary traditions represent not only valuable cultural expressions but also important resources for regional development, tourism diversification, and community resilience (Silva, Ramazanova, and Freitas 2025; Sosa, Aulet, and Mundet 2021; Zocchi et al. 2021).

The application of the CRIPREDE methodology enabled the integration of stakeholder perspectives, institutional considerations, and feasibility-oriented policy development into a coherent strategic framework. SWOT analysis, peer-review workshops, policy co-creation sessions, and feasibility testing collectively functioned as mechanisms for transforming dispersed experiences and priorities into coordinated governance actions (Čolic et al. 2020; Iaione, De Nictolis, and Santagati 2022).

The chapter further demonstrated that participatory strategy-building strengthens stakeholder ownership, increases institutional legitimacy, and facilitates cross-sector coordination. In transnational heritage contexts such as the Danube Region, these participatory governance mechanisms are particularly important due to institutional diversity, territorial fragmentation, and the multiplicity of actors involved (Niković et al. 2024; Iaione, De Nictolis, and Santagati 2022).

One of the key contributions of the strategy lies in its operational governance architecture. The establishment of the Strategy Working Group (SWG), the introduction of Transnational Action Plans (TAPs), and the integration of adaptive implementation principles collectively transformed the strategy from a static policy document into a flexible governance framework capable of supporting long-term coordination and implementation.

The strategy also illustrates how minority culinary heritage can be positioned within broader sustainable development agendas. By linking heritage safeguarding with entrepreneurship,

tourism diversification, green mobility, digitalisation, and community empowerment, the strategy moves beyond preservation-oriented approaches and positions culinary heritage as a dynamic driver of inclusive regional development (Silva, Ramazanova, and Freitas 2025).

At the same time, the findings highlight the importance of balancing innovation and economic valorisation with authenticity, community ownership, and ethical representation. Minority culinary heritage governance must therefore remain sensitive to the risks of stereotyping, over-commercialisation, and exclusionary heritage narratives.

Finally, the chapter demonstrates that safeguarding minority culinary heritage should not be understood solely as an exercise of cultural preservation. Rather, it represents an ongoing process of cultural valuation, institutional coordination, participatory governance, and sustainable territorial development. The findings reinforce the view that culinary heritage constitutes a dynamic social field in which cultural actors, tourism organisations, policymakers, local communities, and market participants continuously negotiate meanings, values, and development priorities. Within this context, the long-term viability of minority culinary heritage depends not only on the existence of supportive policy frameworks but also on the capacity of regional actors to coordinate resources, build strategic partnerships, and align diverse interests across governance levels. The Culinary Trail strategy illustrates how participatory and transnational governance mechanisms can facilitate this process, transforming culinary heritage from a cultural asset to be preserved into a strategic resource for inclusive and sustainable regional development.

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SUSTAINABILITY FRAMEWORKS FOR THE LONG-TERM PRESERVATION OF CULINARY HERITAGE

Alexandru Marin [8]
POLITEHNICA Bucharest

Laura-Florentina Boanță
POLITEHNICA Bucharest

Gabriel-Cornel Boanță
POLITEHNICA Bucharest

Abstract

This chapter proposes a comprehensive analysis of the sustainability framework developed within the "Culinary Trail of the Ethnic and Local Cuisine in the Danube Region" DRP project by consolidating the eleven project outputs into five integrated Sustainability Tools (ST1–ST5). These tools are intended to ensure medium- and long-term environmental, economic, socio-cultural and governance sustainability beyond the project implementation period. Using a qualitative case study approach, based on project deliverables, the chapter examines the structure, implementation mechanisms, stakeholder ecosystems in the Danube Region, key performance indicators (KPIs) and interdependencies of each tool. The analysis reveals the role of clustering in enhancing strategic coherence of the study approach, the importance of introducing and monitoring measurable indicators in operationalising sustainability, and the implication of efficient governance structures for ensuring continuity of activities. Furthermore, the chapter explores the sustainability strategy, operational roadmap, financing mechanisms, monitoring and evaluation systems., and risk management framework, during project implementation period and beyond Culinary Trail project lifecycle. The results of the case study reveals, without any doubt, that conceptually and effective integration of digital infrastructures, governance frameworks, business models, training systems, and cultural events organisation into a coherent sustainability framework brings substantial contribution to the medium and long-term effectiveness of culinary tourism in the Danube Region. The framework also provides a model for policymakers and practitioners and identifies opportunities for future research.

Keywords: Culinary tourism; sustainability framework; Danube Region; cultural heritage; governance; innovation; SMEs; slow tourism; digital infrastructures; policy integration

[8] alexandru.marin@upb.ro, laura.boanta@upb.ro, gabriel.boanta1006@upb.ro
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Introduction

Context and Background

In recent years, tourism has fundamentally reoriented its focus due to global economic challenges, environmental regulations, and changing consumer habits. The classical mass tourism model—very formalised, implying high-volumes of clients, and mostly not connected to local communities—is confronted with growing competition, prioritising sustainability, authenticity, and meaningful experiences. Moreover, culinary tourism has emerged as a rapidly expanding sector that integrates cultural heritage, economic development, and environmental stewardship through the relationship between food, place, and identity. Food functions as both a tangible and an intangible cultural asset, encompassing traditional practices, social rituals, agricultural systems, and historical narratives. Culinary tourism can therefore shape destination branding, enrich visitor experiences, and generate economic opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises, family-owned businesses, and community-based initiatives.

The Danube Region presents significant potential for culinary tourism development, grounded in its complex historical trajectory and contemporary socio-cultural dynamics. Spanning multiple national jurisdictions and encompassing over thirty ethnic groups, the region exhibits exceptional cultural and culinary diversity, the result of centuries of migration, trade, and intercultural exchange, constituting a strategic resource for sustainable tourism development provided it is effectively mobilised through coordinated policy frameworks. Despite this potential, the region faces persistent obstacles to harnessing culinary heritage for equitable and sustainable development. These include fragmented cross-border initiatives, inadequate stakeholder coordination, limited integration of culinary assets into formal tourism strategies, and the absence of durable sustainability mechanisms. Development projects frequently cease operations once public or private funding cycles conclude, reflecting a systemic reliance on external financing rather than the development of endogenous capacities.

The “Culinary Trail of Ethnic and Local Cuisine in the Danube Region” project addresses these challenges through a structured platform that links culinary heritage with tourism development, innovation, and sustainability. At its core is a comprehensive system designed to endure beyond the project lifecycle. It consolidates eleven project outputs into five interconnected Sustainability Tools (ST1–ST5), each targeting specific sustainability dimensions while contribution a coherent system. This approach operationalises sustainability through concrete instruments, measurable indicators, and structured implementation mechanisms rather than conceptualising it as an abstract objective.

Research Problem

Despite the emerging reorientation of culinary tourism toward more holistic and sustainable models, many associated initiatives continue to struggle with achieving long-term viability. This persistent issue is stemming primarily from the fragmentation of efforts wherein discrete and often isolated projects concentrate on narrow dimensions such as marketing, heritage preservation, or business development without synthesising these elements into a coherent, unified approach, consequently generating inefficiencies, redundant activities, and constrained impact. Governance

deficiencies further exacerbate these limitations by undermining the effectiveness of culinary tourism interventions.

In transnational contexts such as the Danube Region, disparities in institutional frameworks, policy priorities, and resource endowments substantially impede coordination and collaboration among participating organisations, while the absence of robust governance structures complicates stakeholder alignment, strategy implementation, and progress monitoring. A further critical challenge concerns the lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, including essential managerial components. Many tourism projects fail to collect and analyse data in a structured manner, thereby restricting their capacity for adaptive management and continuous improvement. This issue is of particularly relevant in the pursuit of sustainability objectives that necessitate ongoing assessment of long-term impacts across multiple dimensions. The research problem addressed in this chapter centres on determining how an integrated system of sustainability tools can overcome fragmentation, enhance governance performance, and ensure the long-term viability and scalability of culinary tourism initiatives in a complex transnational setting.

Aim and Specific Objectives

The primary focus of this chapter is to analyse the sustainability framework developed within the Culinary Trail project and assess its effectiveness as a model for sustainable culinary tourism. The corresponding specific objectives address the following challenges, i.e. to conceptualise and clearly define sustainability in culinary tourism through an integrated, multi-dimensional functional framework; to examine the structure, rationale, and components of the proposed five innovative sustainability tools; to provide a detailed analysis of implementation mechanisms, developed monitoring systems, and evaluation methods for anticipated impacts; to identify key insights pertaining to governance practices, innovative approaches, and stakeholder engagement; and to evaluate the broader implications for tourism policy, academic research perspectives, and practical implementation specificities.

Context and Background

Theoretical Background

The Culinary Trail project sustainability framework is composed of a multi-dimensional interpretation mode of sustainability that expands beyond the traditional triple bottom line (environmental, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions), by inclusively incorporating governance and innovation criteria as additional pillars. This expanded model reflects contemporary sustainability theoretical approach, which emphasises the importance of institutional coordination, stakeholder participation, and adaptive capacity of the implicated actors. In the context of culinary tourism, sustainability requires not only the preservation of socio-cultural specific heritage but also its integration into modern dynamic economic and social systems.

Consequently, our proposed sustainability framework aligns with several existing theoretical perspectives, as follows:

- Sustainable tourism approach, focusing on responsible resource usage and long-term viability.
- Experiential thematic tourism, emphasising authentic and immersive experiences.
- Slow tourism orientation, promoting local engagement and reduced environmental impact.
- Frugal innovation, creating low-cost solutions with limited resources.
- Governance theory, emphasising cross-sectoral collaboration and policy coherence in the governance of culinary tourism initiatives.

These perspectives are operationalised through the introduction of our original five Sustainability Tools, each translating theoretical concepts into practical mechanisms.

The sustainability framework of the Culinary Trail project is grounded in several theoretical traditions that collectively inform its design and implementation, at its core being the triple bottom line concept, which emphasises the need to balance environmental protection, economic development, and social equity (Elkington 1997). This approach has become a foundational principle in sustainability studies, particularly in the context of tourism (Saarinen 2006).

As previously noted, the Culinary Trail framework extends beyond the conventional triple bottom line by incorporating governance and innovation as additional pillars, reflecting a growing consensus in the scholarly literature that sustainability cannot be attained without effective institutional arrangements and continuous adaptation to evolving conditions (Bramwell and Lane 2011). Within the specificities of the tourism domain, the corresponding functional framework aligns with sustainable tourism theory, which advocates responsible resource use, community involvement, and long-term economic viability (UNWTO 2018), while also drawing on the concept of experiential tourism, wherein value is generated through immersive and meaningful interactions with local cultures and communities (Pine and Gilmore 1999). The concept of slow tourism holds particular relevance in the context of culinary experiences, emphasising the prioritisation of quality over quantity and encouraging visitors to engage deeply, and where feasible professionally, with local environments and communities (Fullagar et al. 2012). This approach resonates with core sustainability principles by promoting extended stays from the perspective of the tourist séjour, reducing environmental impact, and fostering stronger connections between visitors and host communities. A further practical influence derives from frugal innovation, which focuses on developing cost-effective, resource-efficient solutions accessible to a broad range of stakeholders (Radjou and Prabhu 2015). Within Culinary Trail project this approach is reflected in mobile food concepts and zero-waste practices. Finally, governance efficiency underscores the importance of collaboration, coordination, and policy integration in achieving sustainability outcomes. In complex macro-regions such as the Danube, effective governance implementation necessitates the involvement of multiple stakeholders, including public authorities, private actors, and civil society organisations (Hall and Gössling 2016).

Literature Review

The scientific and professional literature on culinary tourism has expanded considerably in recent years, both in volume and thematic scope, reflecting its growing significance within the broader field of thematic tourism. Researchers and practitioners have emphasised the role of traditional food in shaping destination identity, enhancing visitor experiences, and supporting local economies (Richards 2015; Ellis et al. 2018). Nevertheless, several challenges have also been

identified, among which the commodification of cultural heritage constitutes a primary concern: traditional practices are frequently adapted or simplified to accommodate tourist expectations, resulting in a loss of authenticity and the erosion of the cultural value inherent in culinary traditions (Timothy 2016). Another issue pertains to the uneven distribution of economic and social benefits. Although tourism can generate substantial economic opportunities, these are often concentrated in specific locations or among groups, thereby marginalising others and underscoring the need for inclusive approaches that ensure equitable participation and balanced benefit-sharing.

In this respect, sustainability in tourism has been widely studied in literature, but there remains unfortunately serious gap between theory and practice. Many studies frameworks are only theoretically conceptualised, lacking practical and realistic guidance for implementation. Additionally, it raises the necessity of several integrated models, addressing simultaneously the multiple dimensions of sustainability, as mentioned before.

Today, artificial intelligence instruments and modern available digital technologies have emerged as key enablers in tourism, facilitating communication, marketing, and analysis data collection (Gretzel et al. 2015). In this respect, within culinary tourism domain, digital platforms serve, increasingly, as effective tools for the preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage, while also enabling interactive user engagement and continuous feedback mechanisms implementation (Richards 2021).

Capacity building and innovation usefulness are also critical factors in sustainable tourism development, implemented through, e.g. training programmes, knowledge-sharing platforms, and policy support mechanisms, enhancing the skills and professional capabilities of stakeholders, enabling them to adapt to changing conditions and seize new opportunities in actual very competitive socio-economic environment (Hjalager 2002).

Overall, the Culinary Trail project framework effectively addresses these challenges by providing a holistic and integrated professional approach that potentially incorporates digital tools, structured governance, innovative business models, training and capacity-building programmes implementation, and organisation of and participation at culturally driven events.

Key Concepts

The Culinary Trail project framework is built around several key concepts that underpin its structure and operation. In this respect, Sustainability Tools (STs) represent integrated instruments that combine strategic, operational, and evaluative components, each of them addressing a specific dimension of sustainability, while also contributing to better functioning of the overall system, serving the purpose of reaching assumed long term success targets, in developing thematic tourism offering support instruments for promotion and preserving culinary traditions. Within this framework, Culinary Heritage refers to the collective knowledge, practices, and traditions related to food within a specific cultural context, including recipes, techniques, ingredients, and cultural meanings associated with food (Bessière 1998). Slow Culinary Tourism, on another hand, emphasises authenticity, sustainability, and local engagement, encouraging visitors to experience food in its cultural and environmental context (Fullagar et al. 2012).

Moreover, Frugal Gastronomy focuses on resources efficient utilisation, waste reduction, and inclusive innovation implementation, promoting sustainable practices in food production and consumption (Radjou and Prabhu 2015).

Finally, Governance and Innovation mechanisms promotion involve the coordination of stakeholders, development of local, regional, national and trans-Danube international policies, and continuous improvement of practices through knowledge exchange and inter-regional collaboration (Hall 2011).

Data

Description of Data Sources and Sampling Procedures

The analysis presented in this chapter draws upon data derived from the Culinary Trail project, specifically the finalised suite of sustainability tools and the accompanying strategy documents. The data sources include the following items:

- Methodological frameworks outlining sustainability tools.
- Reports from participatory workshops involving stakeholders.
- Documentation of project outputs and their clustering into five tools.
- Monitoring indicators and key performance metrics.
- Implementation of roadmaps and evaluation systems.

The data sources encompass a wide range of stakeholders across the Danube Region, including:

- Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the gastronomy sector.
- Public authorities and policymakers.
- Cultural institutions and researchers.
- Tourism organisations and destination management bodies (DMBs).
- NGOs and civil society actors.
- Local communities and ethnic groups.

This diverse data sourcing method ensures that the analysis framework reflects multiple perspectives and addresses the needs of different stakeholder groups.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative case study approach, focusing on the Culinary Trail project as a representative instance of integrated sustainability within the culinary tourism domain (Yin 2018), enabling an in-depth examination of complex processes, interactions, and outcomes. The research design is both descriptive and analytical, seeking to document the structure of the sustainability framework and its implementation while critically evaluating its effectiveness from a professional perspective.

Methods and Analytical Approach

The study integrates the following methods: document analysis, entailing a critical examination of project deliverables and supporting materials; comparative analysis, comprising a professional

evaluation of the five sustainability tools and their interrelationships; indicator-based assessment, concerning the analysis of key performance indicators and anticipated impacts; and qualitative synthesis, involving the interpretation of stakeholder engagement processes and proposed governance mechanisms.

This qualitative multi-method approach provides a comprehensive understanding of both the conceptual and practical dimensions of the sustainability framework.

Analysis

Presentation and Interpretation of Results

The Culinary Trail project sustainability framework represents a highly structured, indicator-driven and implementation-oriented system, where sustainability is operationalised through five interlinked Sustainability Tools (ST1–ST5). Unlike many other conceptual tourism sustainability models, our framework is explicitly designed for post-project implementation continuity, integrating monitoring systems, governance structures, financing mechanisms, and measurable KPIs over a five-year time horizon.

A key analytical strength of the framework lies in the systematic clustering of the 11project outputs of the projects into five tools, which addresses a central weakness in many tourism development models, namely, the fragmentation between strategy, implementation, and evaluation (Bramwell and Lane 2011). These tools are not merely thematic groupings but functional sustainability instruments, each combining the following concepts:

- strategic direction of action,
- operational mechanisms to be used,
- stakeholder ecosystems development,
- monitoring and evaluation systems utilisation,
- quantified impact targets evaluation.

This approach enables the development of a closed-loop, feedback-based sustainability system in which planning, implementation, monitoring and adaptation are embedded within each tool, thereby supporting long-term impact across environmental, economic, socio-cultural and governance dimensions.

Consequently, in the following paragraphs of our study, we present a critical, in-depth examination of each tool, assessing both its functional contributions and its broader implications, within sustainability theory and practice conceptualisation.

ST1 – Culinary Trail App and Take-up Sustainability Tool

ST1 embodies the digital infrastructure underpinning the Culinary Trail project's sustainability framework, integrating two core outputs—O1.1 (Culinary Trail Web and Mobile Application) and O1.3 (Take-up Assessment)—into a unified operational subsystem that concurrently fulfils dissemination functions, sustains stakeholder engagement, and enables performance evaluation.

Structural Composition and Functional Logic

The design of ST1 introduces a dual-layer embodiment:

- Operational Layer (O1.1), comprising a digital platform gathering information and showcasing culinary heritage with the support of a structured catalogue of recipes, traditions, locations, and events;
- Analytical Layer (O1.3), implementing monitoring and performance evaluation mechanisms tracking user engagement, stakeholder participation, and degree of client's satisfaction.

This integration ensures that the performed analysis is not a static one, but dynamically evolving through continuous feedback loops implementation, linking user interaction with content development and operational subsystem optimisation.

Role within the Sustainability Framework

ST1 plays a central role in operating several sustainability dimensions, as follows:

- Socio-cultural sustainability, by documenting and disseminating ethnic and local culinary traditions, the performed analysis contributes to heritage preservation and the increase of ethnic culinary related cultural visibility.
- Economic sustainability, by directing users to culinary "points" (restaurants, producers etc.), thus supporting development of local businesses and tourism functional flows.
- Environmental sustainability, through the promotion of trail-based tourism and eco-friendly mobility (assumed target ≥20%), that encourages lower-impact travel behaviour.
- Governance and innovation, by generating real-time data, thus supporting evidence-based decision-making procedures, across the entire sustainability framework.

Stakeholder Ecosystem

ST1 integrates a wide network of stakeholders, listed below:

- Restaurants and culinary "points" (particularly focused on minorities and their traditional cuisine habits)
- Destination Management Organisations (DMOs)
- NGOs focused on supporting long term sustainability and ethnic culinary related cultural heritage preservation
- Tourism operators
- Sustainability experts
- End-users (e.g., tourists and local communities)

This multi-actor stakeholders structure ensures that the performed analysis is continuously enriched with authentic content and updated information, while also enabling implementation of participatory governance.

Monitoring System and Indicators

One of the strongest features of ST1 is its highly structured monitoring facility, which includes both quantitative and qualitative indicators, as follows:

- Number of downloads and active users
- Number of catalogued culinary items (>300, assumed target)
- Number of participating restaurants (>30, expected target)
- User satisfaction scores (≥4 of maximal 5 score, established target)
- Number of survey responses (≥250, indicative target)
- Social media engagement
- Updates in recipes, events, and trail coverage

Data is collected through the following means:

- Web and mobile analytics (e.g., Google Analytics, Firebase)
- Surveys and interviews
- Stakeholder feedback
- Social media monitoring

All the above-mentioned elements facilitate a multi-source data system development, enhancing reliability and "depth" of professional insights.

Expected Impact and Performance Targets

Over a five-year period, ST1 aims to achieve the following targets:

- Minimum 200 smartphone application downloads coming from target audience
- More than 300 new culinary items catalogued and publicly made available
- Representation of no fewer than ten ethnic culinary traditions
- Minimum 30 new active culinary locations are to be established
- More than 20% eco-friendly mobility routes adoption

These targets demonstrate that ST1 is designed as a measurable and scalable sustainability instrument, not merely a communication tool.

Critical Evaluation

From an analytical analysis point of view, ST1 ensures a significant reached step forward in development of digital sustainability tools, particularly in its integration in an effective monitoring subsystem and increasing the stakeholder's engagement. However, several challenges cannot be avoided, as follows:

- Digital dependency, meaning that long-term sustainability requires ensuring continuous technical maintenance and content updating of the catalogue included in the smartphone application.
- Metric-driven subjective bias association, implying that proposed quantitative indicators of analysis possibly may fail to capture the more complex and nuanced qualitative expressions of ethnic culinary related cultural authenticity.
- Clients / stakeholders behavioural assumptions, i.e., assumed targets such as eco-friendly mobility strongly depending on hardly to be controlled external factors beyond the performed analysis's control capacity.

Systemic Role

ST1 has capacity to manifest itself as the data and feedback engine of the entire sustainability framework, in connection with following secondary functionalities:

- informs ST2 (policy and strategy updates),
- supports ST3 (market insights for businesses),
- enhances ST5 (event promotion and visibility).

Nevertheless, this tool ensures that the sustainability framework remains adaptive, evidence-based, and responsive to emerging challenges and stakeholder needs.

ST2 – Culinary Heritage Strategy and Action Sustainability Tool

ST2 reflects the governance capacity, policy measures support, and strategic coordination core of the Culinary Trail project framework, thus integrating three project outputs:

- O1.2: Transnational Strategy
- O1.4: Strategy Working Group (SWG)
- O3.2: Transnational Action Plans (TAPs)

Structural Architecture

ST2 is built on a three-tier governance model designed to ensure strategic coordination, effective implementation, and long-term sustainability across all project activities and stakeholder level of implication. The governance structure combines strategic decision-making, operational management, and local stakeholder engagement into an integrated framework of project outputs, described in an alternative interpretation mode, as follows:

1. Strategic Layer (O1.2), encompassing vision, objectives, and priorities for culinary heritage preservation.
2. Participatory Governance Layer (O1.4), determining stakeholder engagement through the essential contribution of Strategy Working Group (SWG).
3. Effective Operational Layer (O3.2), that configurates transnational strategy into actionable plans with express responsibilities and timelines clearly defined.

This conceptual structure ensures continuity of associated activities to Culinary Trail initiative, following the "logic": vision → coordination → implementation, having the role to bring corrections to the common functional disconnections between planning and execution phases of development projects.

Role within the Sustainability Framework

ST2 is destined to make operational the four sustainability pillars defined as follows:

- Socio-cultural, for preservation of ethnic cuisines and traditions (≥200 new recipes documented and catalogued).
- Economics, as support for SMEs and local producers (more than 10% revenue increase).
- Environmental, for promotion of local sourcing (minimum 70% assumed) and eco-friendly practices to be adopted.
- Governance performance and innovation implementation, in connection with cross-border coordination capacity and integration of local / regional / national / international policy support measures.

Stakeholder Ecosystem

ST2 involves a highly diverse group of stakeholders, making essential contributions to sustainability of project activities, listed below:

- Public authorities and policymakers
- Tourism organisations and DMOs
- Cultural institutions and sustainability experts
- Gastronomy sector actors
- Food producers and traditional artisans
- Educational institutions, at all levels
- Media and communication actors.

This ecosystem ensures that governance actors of activities in Culinary Trail projects have multi-level and multi-sectoral characteristics, enhancing its legitimacy and effectiveness capacity.

Monitoring and Evaluation System

Proposed ST2 makes use of a multi-dimensional evaluation framework, including following structural indicators:

- Economic indicators (revenue, business growth)
- Cultural indicators (heritage preservation, minority representation)
- Educational indicators (trainings, curriculum integration)
- Environmental indicators (local sourcing, waste reduction)

Consequently, proposed methods for monitoring and evaluation of performance comprise the following activities, listed briefly as follows:

- baseline benchmarking,
- mixed-methods evaluation,
- monitoring reports,
- scorecard systems.

Expected Impact and Targets

As proposed in our project, over five years' time frame, ST2 aims to achieve the following targets:

- Minimum 5 policy documents proposed or specialised training / education curriculum updates.
- More than 70% of local primary resources, for traditional food production, need to be adopted among stakeholders.
- Minimum 60% adoption of eco-friendly culinary practices.
- More than 200 new culinary practices, fully documented and made publicly available.
- Minimum 5 ethnic minority groups being actively involved in culinary thematic tourism.

These targets are assumed, proving that ST2 is designed to produce institutional and structural changes across the entire Danube macro-regional area, not just at project-level outcomes.

Critical Evaluation

In our opinion, ST2 is undoubtedly the most strategically important tool, but also the most complex, justified by following statements:

- Governance performances dependency, meaning that success relies on sustained engagement of implicated institutions and active stakeholders' contribution.
- Controlling impact of policy measures implementation, in connection with updating strategies across multiple countries in Danube Region.
- Implementation variability, including the fact that differences in regional administrative and professional capacity may affect consistency of adopted improvement measures.

Systemic Role

We assume that ST2 should act as a central coordination mechanism, ensuring the following purposes reach:

- alignment of all sustainability tools with project strategic objectives,
- integration of new proposed policies with improved practices implementation,
- long-term sustainability beyond project funding contractual period.

Briefly, we consider it connects the following sustainability tools, with causality logic mentioned in brackets:

- ST1 (data → policy)
- ST3 (business → regulation)
- ST4 (training → governance)
- ST5 (events → culinary traditions + cultural heritage + thematic tourism strategy)

ST3 – Sustainability Tool for Slow Culinary Business and Franchise Models

ST3 is associated with the economic operationalisation layer of the Culinary Trail project sustainability framework, considered as the principal mechanism through which strategic objectives and governance structures are fully supportive for valuable tangible economic outputs, market-based activities, and sustainable innovation pathways. Together with ST1, providing content of data infrastructure and ST2, determining the governance and policy environment, ST3 facilitates the effective utilisation of its specific components by transforming them into viable entrepreneurial initiatives, revenue-generating activities, and employment opportunities with sustainable economic impact, thereby embedding sustainability within real economic processes rather than just abstract planning.

Structural Composition and Functional Logic

The ST3 framework adopts a dual-component architecture, structurally integrating:

- O2.1 – Slow Culinary Business Model, addressing strategic configuration
- O2.2 – Small River Boat and Food Cart Concepts, defining operational deployment

This dual-layer structure reconciles high-level organisational design—spanning target market identification, value proposition design, partner networks, operational workflows, and monetisation streams—with tangible, field-level execution in itinerant gastronomy and experiential tourism.

By bridging theoretical strategy and empirical application, the framework ensures that sustainability is systematically embedded across all organisational tiers, directly shaping how culinary ventures are conceptualised, operationalised, and perceived by end users and stakeholders.

Role within the Sustainability Framework

ST3 serves as a pivotal operational vehicle within the broader sustainability framework, specifically driving its economic dimension. By systematically bridging regional cultural heritage with contemporary market dynamics, the framework enables traditional culinary practices to achieve commercial viability and generate sustainable local employment without compromising their cultural authenticity or contextual relevance.

At the same time, ST3 contributes to social sustainability development, by promoting inclusive entrepreneurial initiatives, explicitly targeting underrepresented groups, including young entrepreneurs, ethnic minorities and rural communities.

This focus reflects a deliberate effort to address structural inequalities in access to thematic and slow tourism markets, ensuring that benefits of culinary tourism are distributed more equitably.

Also, from an environmental perspective, ST3 are focused on functional principles such as local sourcing, reduced transportation costs, and waste minimisation, particularly using available and easily accessible small-scale and mobile infrastructure.

Measurement Framework and Key Performance Indicators

A defining characteristic of ST3 relies on the strongly articulated key performance indicators (KPIs) used framework, which correlates economic sustainability with a quantifiable and monitorable associated business process. The respective KPIs include:

- engagement of at least 20 new entrepreneurs,
- establishment of a minimum of 10 operational franchise units,
- development of at least 25 new or improved culinary products or services,
- creation of at least 20 new culinary jobs,
- achievement of at least a 10% increase in local revenue.

These indicators demonstrate that ST3 is not conceived as an experimental or pilot initiative but as a scalable economic system with clearly defined impact targets. The above-mentioned inclusion of both quantitative and outcome-based indicators guarantees that performance is possible to be evaluated not only in terms of carried-out activities, but also in terms of actual socio-economic results.

Innovation through Mobile Culinary Infrastructure

One of the most innovative and original elements of ST3 is referring to the utilisation of mobile culinary infrastructure, particularly through small river boats and food carts. These solutions represent the adoption of a modern approach, called “frugal innovation”, combining cost-efficiency with flexibility and adaptability.

The advantages of this approach can be listed as follows:

- Operational flexibility enabling businesses to adapt and deliver services efficiently across diverse locations, market environments, and implementation contexts.
- Improved accessibility, particularly in remote or underserved geographical areas that are not currently integrated into thematic and/or slow tourism circuits.
- Integration with culinary thematic events and tourism routes, enhancing visibility, as branding support, and clients / stakeholders easily access.

Deploying mobile culinary infrastructure diversifies economic opportunities while elevating slow and experiential tourism. By delivering adaptive, location-sensitive culinary encounters, this approach enhances contextual engagement and visitor value proposition.

Critical Challenges and Limitations

Despite its strategic advantages, ST3 remains vulnerable to key structural constraints. Success depends on sufficient demand for slow culinary tourism, adequate partner capitalisation and management readiness, and supportive regulatory frameworks for franchise scaling. Moreover, franchising creates a core governance challenge: balancing operational standardisation for quality control against the preservation of authentic, site-specific cultural heritage.

Systemic Role

Within the broader sustainability framework, ST3 functions as the core mechanism for economic value creation. It integrates four complementary system components—strategic orientation (ST2), empirical data analytics (ST1), human capital enhancement (ST4), and market promotion (ST5). This structural alignment translates sustainability objectives into tangible financial outcomes, reinforcing overall systemic resilience.

ST4 – Sustainability Tool for Culinary Tourism Training, Demonstration and Policy Support and Innovation

ST4 comprises the available knowledge, innovation capacity, and governance mechanisms, seen as conceptual important components of the Culinary Trail project framework, acting as the principal instrument through which learning processes, practical experimentation, and policy support development are interconnected. By integrating O2.3 (Demonstration and Training Centre) with O3.1 (Joint Innovation and Policy Centre – JIPC), the tool under discussion facilitates a functional system in which capacity building, innovation processes, and governance structures mutually reinforce one another.

Structural Composition and Functional Logic

ST4 comprises four functional dimensions: capacity development, frugal product innovation, stakeholder collaboration, and institutional integration. This structural setup facilitates the translation of generated knowledge into operational practices and policy frameworks. Furthermore, it fosters an iterative learning loop wherein empirical insights from field-level applications systematically inform strategic planning and governance.

Role within the Sustainability Framework

Within the Culinary Trail sustainability framework, ST4 underpins institutional resilience and adaptive capacity. By systematically developing stakeholder competencies, it enables the operational deployment of dependent modules, notably business model execution (ST3) and governance frameworks (ST2). Furthermore, ST4 fosters innovation-led sustainability, catalysing the development of localised products and practices that reconcile economic objectives with socio-ecological standards.

Measurement Framework and Key Performance Indicators

The Key Performance Indicator (KPI) framework for ST4 reflects its multi-dimensional operational scope by integrating metrics across human capital development, innovation adoption, and governance impact:

- training for at least 200 participants,
- achievement of at least 30% of employment or self-employment among trainees,
- adoption of various innovations by at least 40% of participants,
- engagement of at least 50 active stakeholders,
- development of at least 10 policy recommendations.

This targeted indicator set ensures that ST4 extends beyond training delivery, establishing measurable outcomes across workforce integration, technology and practice adoption, and institutional policy design.

Cross-Border Cooperation and Knowledge Exchange

ST4's primary structural strength resides in its cross-border collaborative capability. By linking heterogeneous stakeholders within the Danube macro-region, the tool serves as a vector for knowledge dissemination and innovation diffusion. This regional integration mitigates structural disparities across territories, enabling the contextual translation and scaling of successful practices across diverse socio-cultural and geographical landscapes.

Integration of Innovation and Policy (JIPC)

The Joint Innovation and Policy Centre (JIPC) is destined to be an institutional bridge within the sustainability framework, preventing domain-isolated innovation by aligning field-level practices with governance architectures. By institutionalising a feedback mechanism, the JIPC converts empirical findings from pilot applications into policy recommendations and strategic governance adjustments, thereby reinforcing vertical consistency between operational experimentation and policy design.

Critical Challenges and Limitations

Despite its strategic merits, ST4 remains vulnerable to key implementation risks. Critical friction points include sustaining participant engagement across longitudinal programmes, securing effective labour-market integration post-training, and addressing the market-readiness gap in innovative outputs. Resolving these structural challenges necessitates aligning pedagogical and innovation frameworks with empirical market demands and regional economic capacity.

Systemic Role

ST4 functions as an adaptive and learning component of the sustainability framework, supporting continuous performance improvement and increasing innovation capacity. Also, it strengthens the professional capacity of stakeholders, enhances policy adopted measures coherence, and ensures that the sustainability system remains responsive to continuous changing conditions.

ST5 – Danube Culinary Festival and Frugal Gastronomy Competition Sustainability Tool

ST5 brings together the elements associated with available knowledge, innovation capacity, and governance mechanisms, acting like efficient interfaces between the components of the Culinary Trail project framework, acting also as one practical mechanism through which learning, experimentation, and policy development are interconnected. By integrating O2.3 (Demonstration and Training Centre) with O3.1 (Joint Innovation and Policy Centre – JIPC), the ST5 tool establishes a system in which capacity building, innovation processes, and governance structures mutually reinforce one another.

Structural Composition and Functional Logic

ST5 integrates two complementary components:

- Festival events, focused on cultural presentation and public engagement.
- Competitive elements, designed to stimulate frugal innovation approach and professional development.

Together, these components support the creation of a multi-functional platform that combines cultural traditions expression, economic activity competitiveness, and knowledge exchange development.

Role within the Sustainability Framework

Essentially ST5 contributes to the development of multiple dimensions of sustainability, as follows:

- Socio-cultural sustainability, through the preservation and promotion of ethnic cuisines.
- Economic sustainability, by attracting tourists and supporting local businesses.
- Environmental sustainability, through the promotion of frugal gastronomy and implementation at a larger scale of zero-waste practices.

- Social inclusion positive perspectives, by enabling participation from diverse stakeholder groups, including unrepresented minority ethnic categories.

Measurement Framework and Key Performance Indicators

The KPIs system reflects the tool's diverse objectives:
- at least 500 new visitors.
- participation at respective events of at least 30 businesses,
- development of at least 20 new sustainable dishes,
- creation of at least 10 validated food-wine pairings,
- achievement of at least 200 media mentions,

These indicators demonstrate that ST5 is designed to generate both quantitative outputs (attendance, participation) and qualitative outcomes (innovation practices, cultural exchange).

Promotion of Frugal Gastronomy

A defining feature of ST5 is its emphasis on frugal gastronomy, which promotes resource utilisation efficiency, waste reduction in culinary processes, sustainable implementation of culinary practices. By integrating these principles into public events and competitions, the tool raises awareness among both professionals and clients / stakeholders, contributing to a significant behavioural change and broader sustainability goals understanding and achievement.

Role of Competitions in Innovation

Incorporating competitive incentives optimises the framework's capacity to stimulate innovation, skill acquisition, and peer-to-peer knowledge transfer. These mechanisms act as catalysts for creative problem-solving while enhancing overall project visibility and participant attraction within target stakeholder ecosystems.

Critical Challenges and Limitations

ST5 operates under specific structural dependencies, notably institutional funding continuity, sustained stakeholder participation, and receptive market conditions within slow tourism segments. Given the temporal nature of event-driven models, achieving sustained systemic impact requires strategic integration with complementary operational tools. Moreover, unmitigated commercial exposure risks driving cultural commodification, wherein the strategic adaptation of culinary heritage to market preferences threatens the permanent displacement of authentic traditional practices.

Systemic Role

Within the broader framework, ST5 acts as a strong visibility and professional engagement engine, amplifying the impact of all other tools, by connecting the other sustainability tools, with reference to essential factors (in brackets):
- ST1 (digital promotion)
- ST3 (business opportunities)
- ST4 (innovation outcomes)
- ST2 (cultural and policy objectives)

Through this associated integrative function, ST5 enhances public awareness, stakeholder participation, and overall sustainability system cohesion.

Systemic Integration and Interdependencies

In addition to the individual strengths of the tools described above, a key strength of the Culinary Trail sustainability framework lies in their systemic integration. The tools are not designed to run in isolated configurations, but contain interconnected elements covering a wider conceptual integration, as listed below:

- ST1 provides data and feedback that informs ST2 us about governance capacity for implementing an effective decision-making process.
- ST2 establishes a strategic and policy framework, in the context of an integrated action of all sustainability tools.
- ST3 translates strategy into economic activities.
- ST4 supports innovation and capacity building across the sustainability system.
- Finally, ST5 amplifies visibility and stakeholders' engagement.

This interdependence of STs facilitates a dynamic and adaptive sustainability system, where each tool reinforces the others, also enhancing resilience by distributing functions across multiple components.

Critical Reflection

From a rigorous professional perspective, the above-mentioned original sustainability framework represents a significant advancement in sustainability practice, in general, but more important for our project as useful and complex instrument, for ensuring long-term perspectives of continuing its essential activities. However, its success depends on several professional actors, with good competences and skills, for ensuring the efficient enrolling in the following activities:

- Effective coordination and governance implementation.
- Sustained stakeholder engagement.
- Adequate attracted funding and resource allocation.
- Continuous monitoring and adaptation to dynamic contexts.

Without a positive response to these conditions, there is a major risk that the sustainability framework may revert to fragmentation or lose momentum over time.

Key Findings

Clearly Structured Main Insights

The implementation of the project led to several key insights regarding the sustainability and long-term impact of the proposed approach:

a. Integration enhances sustainability, by clustering outputs into five sustainability tools (STs), that ensure coherence between strategy and action plans implementation, overcoming fragmentation.
b. Stakeholder engagement is essential, through active participation of diverse implicated stakeholders, strengthening the sentiment of "ownership" and encapsulating elements specific to long-term viability of proposed actions.

c. Digitalisation, in general, but also essential to ensuring our project success, enables continuous monitoring capacity and growth perspectives, with the support of the digital platform (ST1), providing "critical" data for continuous improvement.
d. Innovation in our adopted business model drives economic impact and competitiveness increase, because ST3 clearly reveals how sustainable business models can facilitate the creation of new jobs, in culinary and thematic tourism field of activity, and revenue generation increased capacity.
e. Capacity building is strongly supportive for long-term impact, through the provision of training and the development of innovation competences (ST4), that are essential for developing knowledge specific to culinary and thematic tourism, and managerial professional skills for project stakeholders.
f. Thematic socio-cultural organised events, connected to our Danube Region rich heritage, and strongly connected to the specific of our culinary traditions, amplify visibility / branding process and stakeholders' engagement, with the support of "instruments", such as festivals and competitions (ST5), that enhance public awareness and local economic activity performances.
g. Governance capacity and policy recommendations integration are crucial, strongly connected to the fact that ST2 ensures alignment with regional strategies, enabling scalability of competitiveness performance and professional institutionalisation of the effective management and coordination of the actors involved (e.g., public authorities, NGOs, educational institutions, innovative companies acting in the field of culinary and thematic tourism services etc.).

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

The Culinary Trail project sustainability framework is designed to implement a comprehensive and integrated professional approach to culinary tourism development, strongly associated to specificities of frugal innovation new orientation in small scale businesses in underdeveloped Danube Region communities. By efficiently and pragmatically combining digital tools, local governance structures, flexible business models, effective "hands-on" trainings offer, and organisation of participation at socio-cultural thematic events, focused on culinary traditions and thematic tourism "joint ventures", valuing the culinary heritage of minorities and, not to be neglected, vulnerable (e.g., ethnic, social, economic, gender, beliefs etc.) groups, it addresses the multidimensional nature of sustainability.

To conclude, our five sustainability tools (STs), collectively and following an integrated, original, professional approach, are specifically designed to ensure long-term viability, scalability, and measurable impact of Culinary Trail initiative in Danube Region.

Contributions

It is important to note that the present chapter contributes to the specialised scientific and professional literature through the following actions:

- Developing a scalable and replicable sustainability model supporting an integrated approach to culinary heritage and thematic tourism development.
- Demonstrating the added value of integrating the five sustainability tools into a coherent and synergistic operational framework.
- Highlighting the strategic role of all forms of innovation, with particular emphasis on frugal innovation, as key instruments for enhancing the competitiveness of local community stakeholders across the Danube Region, while simultaneously strengthening governance capacity and supporting long-term sustainability objectives attainment.

Limitations

While the five-tool framework offers meaningful theoretical and empirical insights, several boundary conditions must be noted. First, the analysis is contextually grounded in the Culinary Trail project's pilot deployment, which may restrict findings' external validity across disparate socio-cultural and geographic settings. Second, long-term impacts on regional governance and economic resilience are inferred from predictive assumptions, pending longitudinal post-implementation studies. Finally, quantitative evaluations remain bounded by project-level metrics and self-reported stakeholder assessments, lacking comprehensive cross-territorial comparative statistical datasets across the Danube macro-region.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future scholarly inquiry should advance in four distinct directions. First, empirical research must deploy longitudinal designs to monitor the long-term economic resilience, institutional evolution, and territorial impacts of culinary heritage models in the Danube macro-region. Second, comparative analyses across cross-border initiatives are needed to establish generalisable governance patterns and scalable collaboration mechanisms. Third, attention should turn to the role of digital infrastructure, smart tourism tools, and predictive data analytics in accelerating market integration and visitor engagement. Finally, future studies should critically examine community-level outcomes, evaluating how heritage valorisation fosters identity preservation, intergenerational transmission, and socio-regional cohesion.

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AFTERWORD: FROM RESEARCH TO STRATEGY AND SUSTAINABLE ACTION

Culinary heritage does not survive by itself. Every community has a role in keeping its traditions alive, transmitting knowledge and deciding what should be carried forward. Yet the findings presented throughout this publication show that responsibility for preservation cannot rest with communities alone. Communities may value their heritage deeply and still lack the demographic strength, resources, skills, institutional support or economic conditions needed to preserve it.

This distinction is important. Culinary traditions are often treated as something permanent because they are embedded in everyday life. Recipes are prepared within families, knowledge is passed between generations, particular foods accompany celebrations and rituals, and methods of preparation become so familiar that their continuation seems almost self-evident. But cultural practices are neither automatic nor permanent. Their vulnerability often becomes visible only when the conditions that sustained them have already started to disappear.

This is particularly relevant for minority communities. Many of the communities considered within the Culinary Trail project have maintained their identity, traditions and culinary practices through major historical, political and social transformations. Today, however, they face a different combination of pressures. Population ageing, depopulation, migration, declining intergenerational transmission, changing lifestyles, globalisation and limited interest among younger generations can weaken the social structures through which culinary knowledge has traditionally been transferred. Communities themselves may become geographically dispersed, making collective action increasingly difficult.

Under such conditions, the loss of culinary heritage rarely results from one isolated factor. It emerges from the interaction of demographic, social, cultural, economic and institutional processes. A traditional dish may still be known, for example, while the knowledge of how to prepare it is disappearing. The knowledge may exist, but the ingredients or local production systems that supported it may no longer be available. A community may wish to promote its heritage but lack organisational capacity, financing or digital and entrepreneurial skills. In other cases, local development or tourism policies may recognise innovation and economic growth while giving limited attention to cultural heritage and the communities that carry it.

For this reason, culinary heritage should be understood as a vulnerable social field and, at the same time, as an ecosystem of interconnected actors, knowledge, practices, resources and institutions. Its resilience depends not on one component, but on the relationships between them.

The chapters of this publication have approached this ecosystem from different perspectives. They have examined culinary heritage as a strategic social field shaped by governance, institutions and regional transformation; explored frugality and resourcefulness as forms of knowledge relevant to resilience and sustainable development; analysed the social systems through which cultural knowledge is transmitted; considered the opportunities and risks associated with economic valorisation; demonstrated the importance of participatory strategy development; and addressed the governance, financing, monitoring and other mechanisms required for long-term sustainability.

Taken together, these perspectives lead to a common conclusion: preservation is not a single action. It is a coordinated process.

Families and community members carry knowledge and transmit practices. Younger generations determine whether this knowledge will continue, adapt or gradually disappear. Community organisations create connections and collective capacity. Researchers document, analyse and help make knowledge visible. Educational institutions can support its transmission and create new knowledge around it. Public authorities provide policy frameworks, recognition and resources. Tourism organisations, entrepreneurs and producers can transform heritage into economic opportunities. Regional, national and transnational institutions can connect these efforts and provide continuity beyond individual local initiatives. Each actor has a different role. No single actor can replace the others.

This also means that a Strategy, regardless of how carefully it has been developed, cannot protect culinary heritage on its own. A strategy provides direction. It identifies priorities, actions, responsibilities and mechanisms for cooperation. Its implementation, however, depends on the actors who give those actions meaning in practice.

This was one of the reasons why stakeholder participation was fundamental to the development of the Strategy for the protection and development of ethnic and local culinary heritage in the Danube. The research conducted within the Culinary Trail project was not separated from strategy development. It provided the evidence needed to understand where vulnerabilities exist, what resources and capacities are already present, which actors need to be involved, and where intervention can realistically make a difference. The Strategy emerged from this interaction between research, communities, institutions and other stakeholders.

The research also shows that the relationship between preservation and economic development deserves particular attention. Cultural heritage is still too often treated as an additional element of local or regional development rather than as one of its potential resources. Technological development, infrastructure, investment and innovation are necessary, but development also concerns the identity, knowledge and social capacity of a place.

Culinary heritage can contribute to this development through local production, entrepreneurship, tourism, regional branding and new forms of cooperation. Economic valorisation can provide communities with additional reasons and resources to maintain traditional practices. However, economic use does not automatically lead to preservation. If heritage becomes disconnected from the community that created it, simplified only for tourism purposes or transformed exclusively according to market demand, valorisation may weaken the very cultural meaning it intends to promote.

The question is therefore not whether culinary heritage should generate economic value, but under what conditions this value contributes to its continuity.

The same principle applies to innovation. Preserving culinary heritage cannot mean freezing traditions at a particular point in time. Culinary practices have always changed as communities encountered new ingredients, economic circumstances, technologies and other cultures. Resilience also depends on the ability to adapt. The challenge is to allow this adaptation without losing the knowledge, meaning and identity that give a tradition its cultural significance.

This is where the distinction between the blockers and enablers of preservation becomes useful. Ageing populations, migration, fragmented communities, weak knowledge transmission, insufficient resources, limited skills and poor institutional coordination can act as blockers. Community engagement, education, intergenerational exchange, supportive policies, entrepreneurship, sustainable tourism, digital tools, financing, research and cross-border cooperation can act as enablers. These factors do not operate independently. They reinforce or weaken one another.

The long-term preservation of culinary heritage therefore depends on strengthening the ecosystem around it. This requires more than documenting recipes, organising individual events or including traditional food in tourism promotion. These activities have value, but without continuity, responsible actors, resources and coordination, their impact remains limited.

There are also limits to what can be concluded from the work presented here. The Danube Region contains very different minority communities, demographic realities, institutional systems and economic conditions. No single model can be transmitted unchanged from one community or country to another. The Strategy and the sustainability mechanisms developed through the Culinary Trail project therefore need to be understood as frameworks that require adaptation to local circumstances. Their long-term effectiveness will ultimately depend on implementation and should be examined through continued research, monitoring and evaluation.

This also creates a role for higher education institutions and the scientific community beyond this publication. Further research is needed not only to document endangered culinary traditions, but to understand the conditions under which preservation efforts succeed or fail. Longitudinal research will be particularly important for assessing whether strategic interventions strengthen intergenerational transmission, community capacity and economic sustainability over time.

Perhaps the most important conclusion of this work is therefore a simple one. We cannot assume that cultural heritage will remain because it has survived until now.

Communities are the carriers of their heritage, but they cannot always carry the responsibility for its survival alone. Preservation requires an environment in which communities have the capacity to act and in which institutions, policies, economic actors, researchers and other stakeholders recognise their own responsibilities.

The preservation of culinary heritage is therefore not only about preserving food or documenting the past. It is about maintaining the relationships, knowledge, skills and conditions that allow heritage to remain part of everyday life.

A Strategy can help organise this process. Research can provide evidence. Policies can create opportunities. Economic development can provide resources. But ultimately, heritage remains alive only when people continue to practise it, value it, adapt it and pass it on.

The challenge ahead is therefore not simply to preserve culinary heritage. It is to create and maintain the conditions in which it can continue to live.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Janja Lozar

Janja Lozar holds a university degree in Cultural Studies and Social Anthropology from the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Primorska, Slovenia. Her professional experience spans social science research, education, and the coordination and implementation of national and international research and development projects. As a Research Assistant at the School of Advanced Social Studies (SASS), she contributes to research design and implementation, project proposal development, coordination, and data collection and analysis. Her work emphasises interdisciplinary collaboration, knowledge transfer, and cooperation between academic institutions and project partners. Drawing on her background in cultural studies and social anthropology, she combines research expertise with practical experience in international project implementation. She has been actively involved in several international initiatives, including the Culinary Trail project, reflecting her interest in connecting research, cultural heritage, and sustainable regional development.

Jasmina Jakomin

Jasmina Jakomin holds a master's degree in Sociology and Social Anthropology from Central European University. She is Head of the Project Office at the School of Advanced Social Studies (SASS), Slovenia, and has extensive experience in the management and coordination of international research and development projects, particularly within the Interreg and Erasmus+ programmes. Her professional and thematic interests focus on social inclusion, cultural heritage, sustainable development, education, social innovation and international cooperation. Her work also encompasses project development, stakeholder engagement, and the dissemination and sustainability of project results. She has been actively involved in the coordination of the Culinary Trail project, contributing to the preservation and promotion of culinary heritage, social inclusion and transnational cooperation in the Danube Region.



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