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Gastronomy as a Strategic Tool for Destination Elevation and Value Creation

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ABSTRACT

Gastronomy has increasingly emerged as a critical component of tourism development; however, it is still predominantly positioned as a supporting product rather than a strategic driver of destination competitiveness. This paper argues that gastronomy should be reframed as a systemic and strategic tool for destination elevation and value creation. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature from tourism studies, cultural economics, and place branding, the paper proposes a Gastronomy Value Elevation Framework consisting of four interrelated layers: identity, experience, economy, and system. The framework demonstrates how food culture can enhance destination differentiation, create high-value experiences, strengthen local economies, and support sustainable development. The study integrates theoretical perspectives with applied insights from emerging gastronomy destinations and contributes to the discourse by positioning gastronomy as a measurable and scalable component of destination branding and policy development.

Keywords: *gastronomy tourism, destination branding, value creation, cultural heritage, experience economy, food systems.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly competitive global tourism landscape, destinations face mounting pressure to differentiate themselves beyond traditional attractions. The homogenization of tourism offerings, driven by globalization and standardized service models, has led to a decline in the uniqueness of many destinations (Richards, 2018). In this context, gastronomy has emerged as a powerful medium through which destinations can articulate their identity, culture, and distinctiveness.

Food is no longer merely a necessity for tourists; it is a central element of the travel experience and a key motivator for destination choice (UNWTO, 2017). Despite this growing recognition, gastronomy is often treated as an ancillary tourism product rather than a strategic asset. This paper seeks to address this gap by proposing a conceptual shift: positioning gastronomy as a strategic system that drives destination elevation and value creation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Gastronomy Tourism and Cultural Identity

Gastronomy tourism is defined as travel motivated, in part or in whole, by the desire to experience a destination's food culture (Hall & Sharples, 2003). Food is deeply embedded in cultural identity, serving as a medium through which traditions, histories, and social practices are expressed (Bessière, 1998).

The concept of terroir or it has been coined as "ภูมิลักษณ์" in Thai, further emphasizes the relationship between food, geography, and cultural practices, highlighting how local environmental and cultural conditions shape the characteristics of food (Trubek, 2008). This connection reinforces the role of gastronomy in creating a strong sense of place.

2.2 The Experience Economy and Tourism Value

The transition from a service-based economy to an experience-based economy has transformed tourism

consumption patterns (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Tourists increasingly seek immersive, memorable experiences rather than passive consumption.

Gastronomy plays a crucial role in this transformation by enabling multi-sensory engagement and emotional connections with destinations (Quan & Wang, 2004). Food experiences, such as cooking classes, food trails, and farm visits, extend beyond consumption and become integral to the overall travel narrative.

2.3 Gastronomy and Destination Branding

Destination branding involves creating a unique and recognizable identity that differentiates a place from its competitors (Anholt, 2007). Gastronomy has been identified as a key branding element due to its ability to convey authenticity and cultural richness (Okumus et al., 2007).

The UNESCO Creative Cities Network, particularly the designation of Creative Cities of Gastronomy, further underscores the role of food in city branding and cultural development (UNESCO, 2021). These initiatives highlight how gastronomy can be leveraged not only for tourism promotion but also for broader socio-economic development.

2.4 Value Creation in Tourism Systems

Value creation in tourism extends beyond direct economic benefits and includes social, cultural, and environmental dimensions (Dwyer et al., 2010). Gastronomy contributes to value creation by linking multiple sectors, including agriculture, hospitality, creative industries, and cultural heritage. However, achieving sustainable value requires a systems approach, where stakeholders across the value chain collaborate to create integrated and inclusive tourism ecosystems (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

3. Conceptual Framework: Gastronomy Value Elevation Framework

This paper proposes the Gastronomy Value Elevation Framework, which conceptualizes gastronomy as a multi-layered system that drives destination development.

3.1 Identity Layer: Food as a Marker of Place

The identity layer focuses on how gastronomy reflects the unique characteristics of a destination. Local ingredients, culinary traditions, and cultural narratives contribute to a distinct food identity.

This layer aligns with place identity theory, which emphasizes the importance of cultural and symbolic elements in shaping destination perception (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

3.2 Experience Layer: From Consumption to Engagement

The experience layer transforms food from a product into an interactive and immersive experience. Activities such as cooking workshops, food foraging, and storytelling dining create meaningful engagements.

These experiences enhance tourist satisfaction and increase willingness to pay, contributing to higher value tourism (Kim et al., 2009).

3.3 Economic Layer: Extending the Value Chain

The economic layer highlights how gastronomy extends the tourism value chain by integrating producers, chefs, entrepreneurs, and creative industries.

This integration supports local economies, encourages entrepreneurship, and enables the development of high-value products such as food souvenirs and curated experiences (Everett & Aitchison, 2008).

3.4 System Layer: Building a Sustainable Ecosystem

The system layer emphasizes the importance of governance, collaboration, and capacity building. A well-functioning gastronomy ecosystem requires coordination among public and private stakeholders, policy support, and knowledge development.

This layer ensures the long-term sustainability and scalability of gastronomy tourism initiatives (Hall, 2019).

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The proposed framework demonstrates that gastronomy can serve as a strategic driver of destination development rather than a supporting element. By integrating identity, experience, economic, and system dimensions, destinations can create a holistic and differentiated value proposition.

Moreover, the framework aligns with emerging trends in tourism, including wellness tourism, regenerative tourism, and cultural sustainability. Gastronomy is uniquely positioned to address these trends due to its connection to health, environment, and culture.

4.1. Implications for Policy and Practice

For Destination Managers

- Conduct food asset mapping to identify unique local resources
- Develop experiential products rather than standalone food offerings
- Integrate gastronomy into destination branding strategies

For Policymakers

- Support cross-sector collaboration
- Invest in capacity building for local communities
- Incorporate gastronomy into tourism and cultural policies

For Researchers

- Develop measurable indicators for gastronomy's impact
- Explore the role of gastronomy in city branding frameworks
- Examine long-term socio-economic outcomes.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Gastronomy represents a powerful yet underutilized strategic asset in tourism development. By repositioning gastronomy as a system rather than a product, destinations can unlock new pathways for value creation, differentiation, and sustainability.

The Gastronomy Value Elevation Framework provides a conceptual foundation for understanding and operationalizing this potential. Future research should focus on empirical validation and the development of measurement tools to support policy and decision-making.

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