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Discovering the food travel preferences of university students

Abstract

The main purposes of this study are to understand the perspectives of university students on food tourism and to discover their gastronomic travel preferences. 89 responses were gathered from a university in Izmir (on the west coast of Turkey) by using a structured interview technique. The data were analyzed through the descriptive methods including frequency analysis. Results indicate that the students' food travel preferences significantly vary due to their gastronomic motivations. The vast majority of these potential consumers consider going on a food-related travel in the future. Kebab, doner and baklava have an advantage over other dishes in terms of representing the region and becoming a brand. Participants believe that Turkey, Italy, Mexico, France and Spain are the top five countries that offer the best food experience. This study makes a considerable contribution to the literature on gastronomic preferences of young people through in-depth interviews. This exploratory research sheds light on this field of study for researchers, practitioners and food tourism professionals.

Key words: food travel; culinary tourism; gastro-tourists; gastronomic destinations; Turkey

Introduction

Today, tourists are more practiced, they have enough capital to travel, they have more idle time and they have a chance to 'run away' from their daily routines and get into a new life of freedom and desires while travelling; at least for a while (Gheorghe, Tudorache & Nistoreanu, 2014). According to several authors in the literature (Akdag, Guler, Dalgic, Benli & Cakici, 2018; Mak, Lumbers, Eves & Chang, 2017; Sahin, 2015; Lin, Pearson & Cai, 2011), gastronomy is such a unique experience which is an essential component of the tourism and hospitality industry.

The concept of culinary tourism is practicable to visitors who scheduled the journey partly or thoroughly on tasting the native foods or taking part in various food activities (Lee, Packer & Scott, 2015; Gheorghe et al., 2014). Almost all the tourists prefer to dine out where they have their vacation and experience the culture and atmosphere (Mckercher, Okumuş & Okumuş, 2008; Gyimothy, Rassing & Wanhill, 2000; Joppe, Martin & Waalen, 2001). Considering the high food consumption rates of tourists in destinations, culinary tourism helps the tourism industry generate food related activities and increase vacation quality (Lee et al., 2015). In addition, Henderson (2009) stated that food is the most essential element to enhance the image of the place for the visitors to create a unique experience in the destination.

Tourists' attention in the quality of meals, necessity for sustainable farming due to the worries of nature and health, reachability to information on food and beverage, gathered information regarding several cuisines have an influence on the prospects and purchasing behavior of visitors (Sahin, 2015). Culinary tourism has a major assistance to the behavior and motivation of travel to live an unmatched food experience (Zain, Zahari & Hanafiah, 2018; Leong, Ab, Awang & Abu Bakar, 2017; Harrington

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& Ottenbacher, 2010). It also stimulates the local and national economy, improving the value chain, developing sustainability and inclusion of other industries such as food production and agriculture (WTO, 2017). Being familiar with the local cuisine and gastronomy related travel is essential for the potential visitors of the destination as well. Accordingly, for this research, to be able to understand the potential consumers' perspectives and future tendencies related to food travels or culinary tourism, university students aged between 20 and 23 were selected especially.

After this brief introduction, the second section presents a clear literature review on culinary tourism and tourist motivation in food travels. The third section is on methodology, analyses, and findings. The fourth section concludes the study, along with limitations and suggestions for future research.

Culinary tourism and tourist motivation for food travels

The word "*gastronomy*" was first employed in Ancient Greece. Archestratus wrote a book in the 4th century on wine and food in the Mediterranean and the term was mentioned in that book (Santich, 2004). In 1801, the concept started to be used with *Gastronomie ou L'Homme des Champs a Table* (Gastronomy or Man from Field to Table) by Joseph Bercholux (Goker, 2011). In the definitions of several authors, gastronomy is seen as "*research for good eating and drinking*", and "*transforming the culture of eating and drinking into art*" (Sahin, 2015). The gastronomy and tourism literature can be separated into four views (Mak et al., 2012): 1. Food as an attraction and/or tourist product; 2. Food consumption behavior patterns of tourists; 3. Dining practices of tourists (satisfaction, quality of service, restaurant specifications), 4. The special interest of tourists in food and beverage activities in locations. In this sense, the perspective of this study is related to the second and fourth ones.

Today, culinary tourism has become an ascending aspect of tourism to attract international visitors (Akdag et al., 2018; Crespi-Vallbona & Dimitrovski, 2016; Horng & Tsai, 2010) and several destinations are using food as one of the main attractions in marketing programs (Lin et al., 2011) to differentiate themselves and broaden their market base (McKercher et al., 2008). In addition, tourism professionals are requesting clear comprehending of dining behaviors and choices of visitors to enhance decision making in the fields of marketing (Min & Lee, 2014), consumer relations management (Lee, Lambert & Law, 2016). Food tourism has also become a critical part of developing tourist destinations (Kim, Woo & Uysal, 2009). This type of tourism is progressing as a novel tourist good due to the evidence that one-third of the travel budget is disbursed on food (Telfer & Wall, 2000). That is why local food is a significant element in the evaluation of the vacation quality. One of the most frequently used descriptions of culinary tourism (Lee et al., 2015) is: "*a journey, in regions rich in gastronomic resources, who generate recreational experiences or have entertainment purposes, include: visits to primary/secondary producers of gastronomic products, gastronomical festivals, fairs, events, food tastings or activities related to food.*" According to Harrington and Ottenbacher (2010), this is a type of tourism that has a huge added value to the behavior and motivation of travel to live a matchless food experience. Food tourism is in a close relationship with the lifestyle that counts in experiencing, getting to learn cultures by eating and the features related to culinary tourism generated in the destinations (Diaconescu & Nistoreanu, 2013). Correspondingly, the gourmet tourism practice is taken into consideration as such, if factors aforementioned is the core motivation to take a trip to a specific location (Gheorghe et al., 2014).

The high curiosity in the food and various cuisines have not only had an influence on tourism revenues but also ensured social and financial support to the locals (Almeida & Garrod, 2017; Sengel, Karagoz, Cetin, Dincer, Ertugral & Balık, 2015). The attention in the food ingredients, need for sustainable consumption of food due to the ecological sensitivity, concerns about sanitation, easy

access to information on food and beverage, collected information about cuisines have an influence on the prospects and the purchasing behavior of visitors (Sahin, 2015). As clearly emphasized by Harrington and Ottenbacher (2010) and Henderson (2009), culinary tourism has a huge value added to the motivation of traveling for a unique holiday experience. For example, in the study of Leong et al. (2017), gastronomic attractiveness was positively associated with the location attractiveness and visitor attitude. For gastro-tourists, food is the willpower for travel; the location functions as a tool for gastronomic practices, such as food activities that include cultural and hands-on involvement and observations (Williams, Williams & Omar, 2014).

Tourist motivations form the critical notion for the representation and disclosure of goods and services that create added value for the visitors and motivation is linked with satisfaction. They are also seen as a key factor in comprehending how the visitors make their own decisions (Kim, Woo & Uysal, 2015; Gaztelumendi, 2012). Therefore, some authors debate that motivation might be affected by physical and physiological necessities (hedonism, sensory tools), safe environment, social need, cultural need, belonging, status (Gheorghe et al., 2014; WTO, 2012). There is a wide concurrence in the literature that categorizes tourist motivation as "*push*" factor and "*pull*" factor (Khanna & Israeli, 2017; Smith, Costello & Muenchen, 2010; Fields, 2003). "*Push*" factor is analyzed in the light of demand and defines the visitor to take a trip to locations that contain gastronomic, egocentric and social desires, easing with family, communicating socially, and fulfilling emotional necessity. "*Pull*" factor is considered as; inartificial and cultural activities, festivals, events, food trials and entertainment in the place (Antón, Camarero & Laguna-García, 2017; Lee et al., 2015; Gheorghe et al., 2014). According to Ispas (2011), tourist motivation comes from needs, requests, education, and tastes that add value to tourism demand and the author classifies the core characteristics that define the tourist motivation, as "*personality, perception, lifestyle, experience, and image*".

In the literature on visitor food experiences, the theoretical frame of visitors' food consumption behavior is three-piece: tourists' attributes, food in location and location environment (Mak et al., 2012). Mak et al. (2012) formed a theoretical perspective as "*the potential factors that influence food consumption in tourism*" by tailoring Randall and Sanjur (1981)'s model. This theoretical background provides a frame with its comprehensive categories such as visitor-related characteristics (demographic, physiological, motivational, gastronomic and socio-cultural elements); food characteristics (sensory features, level of price, the content of food and cuisine) and destination-related characteristics (gastronomic identity, servicescape, service encounter). In their study, Quan and Wang (2004) differentiated gastronomic motivations as "*peak touristic experience*" and "*supporting visitor experience*". This perspective emphasizes the notions of reciprocity and prolongation in assessing the consumption of food in tourism. Whilst a top touristic experimentation is a novelty contrarily to routine life and practice, encouraging the visitor practice widens the level of familiarity. In addition, based on the findings of Rahman, Zaman, Hassan and Wei (2018), visitor's perception and satisfaction have a positive and significant impact on the intention of buying local food and there is also a significant relationship between visitor's intentions and visitor's buying behavior.

According to Fields (2002), drivers of food and beverage consumption are divided into four factors; "*physical*", "*interpersonal*", "*cultural*", "*status and prestige*". Based on Kim, Eves and Scarles (2009a)'s findings, food practices can be specified in three areas; demographic, motivational, and psychological elements on account of *food neophobia* - unwilling to experience different food and beverages or *food neophilia* - high tendency to look for novel and unfamiliar foods (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). In addition, Chang, Kivela and Mak (2011) formed a wider gastronomic motivation perspective made up of

"tourists' own food culture", "context of dining experience", "variety of food", "perception of destination", "service encounter" and "performance of tour guide". What actually makes our research unique is that this kind of culinary study on the university students' motivation in food travel does not exist in Turkey with a specific age group of 20-23, thus the study makes a considerable contribution to the literature on gastronomic preferences of these young people through in-depth interviews.

Methodology

The fundamental objective of this research is to comprehend and analyze the perspective of university students living in Izmir on food travels and their preferences related to culinary tourism.

The sample consisted of 89 participants. Throughout the research, a structured interview technique is used in order to collect data from those participants in various empty classrooms. By this way, the participants did not answer the questions outside or in a rush or in any other place where there can be some distraction. Within a questionnaire, eight questions (including socio-demographic and gastronomic profiles) are prepared for the interviews. The theoretical outlook of Mak et al. (2012) about "food consumption of tourist" and "gastronomic motivations" view of Quan and Wang (2004), Kim et al. (2009a) and Chang et al. (2011) inspired the authors during the formation of the interview questions. In addition, a list of 14 popular destinations (Akdag et al., 2018; WTO, 2017) is selected for question "e" to be able to understand which destinations offer the best food experience according to respondents. The questions are as follows;

- a. Have you ever traveled for food and food-related activities?
- b. Do you plan to travel in the future where food-related experiences are the main reason for travel?
- c. When choosing a travel spot, how important is the availability of food and food-related activities from your point of view?
- d. How likely are you to do the food-related activities below when visiting a tourist spot?
 - Visiting the food market
 - Attending a food festival or food-related organization
 - Shopping for the local or traditional food
 - Visiting a trademark restaurant in the destination
 - Eating at a fine dining restaurant
- e. Which of the following three destinations offer the best food experience according to you?
The United States Mexico Italy France Spain United Kingdom Australia India
Japan China South Korea Thailand Vietnam Turkey Other
- f. How do you see the Turkish cuisine around the world? Which type of food can represent the region and become a brand name?
- g. Current relationship status?
Single Married In a relationship Rather not say
- h. Gender, age, and educational area?
Female or Male

Data were gathered in three months (from the beginning of October 2017 - until the end of December 2017). It approximately took 35 minutes to note down the answers of each participant at noon in the peak daytime. In other words, the interaction time with the participants who accept to answer the

questions about culinary tourism and gastronomy related matters took 3,115 minutes in total. After interviews were completed, authors transferred all the answers to a document as the main text for analysis.

Findings

Based on the research findings, Table 1 states that the students have various educational areas, almost half of the respondents are single and most of the other remaining participants are in a relationship. In addition, 60% have already traveled for gastronomy related activities but 39.3% of the respondents stated that they have not traveled for a food-related activity before and 82% of the respondents are planning to take a food-related trip in the future.

Table 1
Socio-demographic and gastronomic profiles

Variable	Respondent	Percentage (%)
Gender	n (89)	100
Male	56	62.9
Female	33	37.1
Age	n (89)	100
20-23 years	89	
Relationship status	n (89)	100
Single	41	46.5
In a relationship	40	45.9
Rather not say	6	5.7
Married	2	2.3
Educational area	n (89)	100
Business administration	42	47.7
Tourism management	14	15.7
Electrical engineering	9	10.2
Finance and banking	9	10.2
Industrial engineering	8	9.0
Logistics	7	7.9
Travel for food activity	n (89)	100
Travelled	54	60.7
Not travelled	35	39.3
Food-related travel plan	n (89)	100
Planning	73	82.0
Not planning	16	18.0

Importance of the availability of food-related activities when choosing a destination

Regarding the question "When selecting a travel destination, how important is the availability of food and food-related activities from your point of view?" 38.2% of the respondents believe that the availability of food and food-related activities are "important" when choosing a specific destination where 29.2% say it is "very important". In addition, for 12.4% of the respondents, the availability of gastronomy-related activities are "not important" when choosing a specific destination and 20.2% of participants used wording like "it makes no difference". Table 2 demonstrates four levels (very important, important, it makes no difference, not important) of participants' expressions that were sorted out by the authors through the main text.

Table 2

Importance level of the availability of food and food-related activities when selecting a destination

Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very important	26	29.2
Important	34	38.2
It makes no difference	18	20.2
Not important	11	12.4
Total	89	100.0

Participation in food-related activities when visiting a tourism destination

In Table 3, regarding the question, "How likely are you to do the following food-related activities when visiting a tourist destination?" the responses vary. For instance, more than 50% of the respondents stated that they would most likely visit a food market, attend a food-related organization, shop for local food, visit a trademark restaurant and eat at a fine dining restaurant. According to 13.48% of the respondents, participation in gastronomy-related activities such as visiting a trademark restaurant in the region or eating at a fine dining restaurant is less likely when visiting a tourism destination. The given answers (without using any prearranged scale during interviews) lead the authors to categorize the phrases in such a way shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Participation in food-related activities when visiting a tourism destination

Possibility of participation	Type of activity				
	Visiting a food market in the destination	Attending a food festival or food-related organization	Shopping for traditional or local food	Visiting a trademark restaurant in the region	Eating at a fine dining restaurant
Most likely (%)	56.18	51.68	64.05	70.79	74.15
Moderate (%)	17.98	28.09	28.08	15.73	12.36
Less likely (%)	25.84	20.23	7.87	13.48	13.49
Total (%)	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Destinations that offer the best food experience in the minds of participants

Table 4 represents the countries that the respondents think that it offers the best food experience to the visitors. Respondents chose the three best, among popular tourism destinations (Akdag et al., 2018; WTO, 2017). At the top of the list is respectively; Turkey, Italy, Mexico, France, and Spain. On the other hand, some of the least mentioned destinations are Australia, Thailand, South Korea, The United Kingdom, and Vietnam.

Table 4

Destinations that offer the best food experience according to participants

Country/Region	Frequency (times in 89)
Turkey	62
Italy	60
Mexico	32
France	24
Spain	19
Japan	19

Table 4 Continued

Country/ Region	Frequency (times in 89)
USA	12
China	11
India	9
Australia	4
Thailand	4
South Korea	3
The United Kingdom	2
Vietnam	1

Turkish cuisine around the world

Based on 82 responses for the first part of the question *How do you see the Turkish cuisine around the world and which food can represent the region and become a brand?*, the vast majority of the respondents claimed that Turkish cuisine is popular, very well-known in the world and the future is promising for culinary tourism. One of the participants said, "Turkish cuisine is a harmony of many cultures." Another respondent believed that "Turkish cuisine is more delicious than the cuisine of Asian countries. The main course in most countries is meat dishes and what makes Turkish cuisine different is various types of home dishes made with olive oil." One of the female respondents emphasized that, "It can make a difference if the variety of food made with olive oil is developed instead of focusing on meat dishes. Vegetables cooked with olive oil, green beans, squash, radish seed, and salicornia can be promoted."

Four of the respondents stated that the cuisine needs to be promoted in a better way and the rich variety of food in seven regions of the country should be presented to the world. One of the female respondents stated, "We need to promote Turkish cuisine much better. Some restaurants around the world cook our food and serve it as if it belongs to them." How to better market various tastes in the region according to one male respondent is; "Baklava and kebab are already known. Breakfast culture or dinner culture (soup, salad, main course, pilaf or pasta, and dessert) can be presented along with a ceremony."

Type of food that can represent the region and become a brand according to participants

For the second part of the question, *how do you see the Turkish cuisine around the world and which food can represent the region and become a brand?* Table 5 is created. There are several tastes or dishes that the participants stressed and according to them, these tastes can represent the destination and become a brand. At the top of the list is respectively; Kebab, Döner, Baklava, Turkish Dessert, and several tastes specifically made with olive oil. For instance, one female respondent expressed that "Our cuisine is prestigious and Gaziantep cuisine is under protection by UNESCO. We have several authentic cuisines like Mediterranean, Aegean, Black Sea and East Anatolia." Moreover, the respondents mentioned the following food items, as well; Black Sea cuisine, East Anatolia cuisine, Gaziantep cuisine, breakfast culture, dinner culture, green beans, squash, radish seed, salicornia, vegetable patty (mücver), salty potato, meatballs stuffed with cracked wheat (içli köfte), soup, tea, boyoz, variety of fish with sauce, spices, stuffed vine leaves (sarma), beyti, dried beans (kuru fasulye), artichoke, pit roasted lamb, lentil, cracked wheat pilaf, a dish made of pounded meat and wheat (keşkek), dessert made with eggs (kaygana), liver, wrap, chicken wings, kokoreç, food with cornmeal and cheese (mıhlama).

Table 5

Type of food participants think that it can represent the region and become a brand

Type of Food/Item	Frequency (times in 89)
Kebab (Adana, Çaç)	46
Döner (Iskender)	22
Baklava	19
Dessert (Turkish delight, künefe, Maraş ice cream, milk puddings)	9
Food made with olive oil	8
Manti	4
Lahmacun	2
Börek	2
Van breakfast	2
Yoğurt	2
Mediterranean cuisine	2
Aegean cuisine	2
Roasted chicken (piliç çevirme)	2

Conclusion and implications

This study mainly examined the perspectives and preferences of university students as potential travel consumers on various gastronomic destinations. As the main contribution and original outcome of this study, it was revealed that for the majority of these young people (67.2% of the respondents in total) "*food and food-related activities in a destination*" take place at the top of the factors that influence their travel decisions. This finding is also parallel with the findings of Robinson and Getz (2014). When we consider these young people as a potential gastro-traveler group, we may note that it would be rewarding for destinations to improve and enhance their culinary supply as a "*pull factor*" in order to attract this segment. On the other side, for 12% of the respondents, the availability of gastronomy-related activities is not important when preferring a specific destination and for 20%, it makes no difference. Finding the reasons why some of the respondents are not that much interested in food-related activities and how to attract this segment of visitors, is worthwhile to increase food-related travels.

In terms of participation in food-related activities during the vacation, surprising answers were obtained from the respondents. Although, a total of 32.6% of the respondents said that the availability of food-related activities are not important or makes no difference (see Table 2), more than half of the respondents stated that they would probably visit a food market, attend a food-related organization, shop for local food, visit a trademark restaurant and eat at a fine dining restaurant. As long as there is some type of gastronomy-related activity or event within the destination, it might attract more visitors and can create a chain reaction in influencing the visitors' perception and motivation. However, for more than half of the respondents, it is probable to eat at a fine dining restaurant or visit a trademark restaurant. In this perspective, the culinary attractions, level of quality service, presentation of the product will matter to get the attention of the visitors. According to 13.4% of the respondents, participation in food-related activities such as visiting a trademark restaurant or eating at a fine dining restaurant is less probable when visiting a tourism destination. To increase the possibility of visiting these places, destination attractiveness, and recommendations of tour guides for the gastronomic activities play a significant role to develop the tourism destination.

As the second implication of the current study, it was revealed that the Top Five destinations that offer the best gastronomic experience are; Turkey, Italy, Mexico, France, and Spain. Due to the respondents' citizenship in Turkey, they might have the tendency to express their feelings accordingly, but it can also be based on hundreds of years of cuisine variety and lots of tastes or dishes in seven regions in the country. In expressing the other countries as Italy, Mexico, France, and Spain, the respondents might have some type of bond or previous experience about the destinations. On the other hand, some of the least mentioned destinations are Australia, Thailand, South Korea, Vietnam, and the United Kingdom. As a convenient interpretation for this result, we might say that the respondents' awareness, knowledge, and experience about local cuisines of these destinations is very limited and needs to be promoted.

The vast majority of the respondents think that Turkish cuisine is very popular and well known around the world and the future is bright for the culinary activities. Respondents of this study as university students believed in the harmony of other cultures that actually formed this cuisine. What really makes Turkish cuisine different is the variety of home dishes made with various tastes representing the regions. According to the respondents, homemade dishes with olive oil play an essential role in representing the food culture. They said, *"Instead of focusing more on meat dishes, the variety of food made with olive oil should be developed. Stuffed vegetables, green beans, squash, salicornia, and radish seed can be promoted."* Furthermore, Turkish cuisine needs to be promoted in a much better way and the rich variety of food and tastes in seven regions of the country should be presented to the world. Based on the concerns of some respondents, some other countries cook Turkish food and present it as their own taste. That is one reason why Turkish cuisine should be well identified domestically and then promoted by putting forward various tastes internationally through fairs, events, festivals and other activities. According to several respondents, tastes such as baklava and kebab are already known worldwide. However, breakfast culture or dinner culture in seven regions of the country might be presented along with a ceremony or traditional approach.

As the managerial implication of the current study, *"Kebab (Adana, Çağ), Baklava, Döner, Turkish Desserts, and local food made with olive oil"* are the tastes that might represent the country internationally and become a brand. However, the hidden culinary treasures stated in Table 5 should also be paid attention by the tourism and gastronomy professionals in order to present these unique tastes and dishes to the world. Without ignoring the type of food that is less frequently expressed by the respondents, all of the stated tastes are the representation of authentic cuisine in the Mediterranean, Aegean, Black Sea, and East Anatolia regions. According to Robinson, Heitmann and Dieke (2011), it is clear that gastronomy plays a significant part in the presentation of tourist destinations. In the progress of culinary tourism, conventional approach can provide the usage of strategic instruments to speak out the diverse and originality of native food of a region. In this regard, the formation of plans to establish guidelines and form culinary goods and services is sensed as a precedence for tourist spots.

Limitations and future research

The study comes with limitations. It is an exploratory and qualitative study intending to understand and analyze the perception of university students through a chosen research method. Due to the nature of research and difficulty in collecting data, the sample size consists of a limited number of respondents residing in Izmir. In addition, the study is limited to university students in İzmir-Turkey and may not be generalizable to the university students elsewhere and/or from different cultures.

For future studies, quantitative research methods might be used by considering the indicators in culinary tourism literature and bringing several perspectives to the research field. Therefore, we suggest the

following agenda of research in the future studies: 'The socio-demographic and gastronomic features of the university students in other universities and the tourists' assessments of the key elements that influence their gastronomic satisfaction and motivation. Research on youth tourism (Tavares, Sawant & Ban, 2018), specifically related to local food can be analyzed.

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