

Luxury hotels as orchestrators in gastronomic destination development and management: the case of Borgo Egnazia and the Itria Valley

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to uncover the main capabilities that a luxury hotel needs to develop when functioning as the orchestrator of a local gastronomic business ecosystem.

Design/methodology/approach – Given the limited attention previous literature has placed on the role of luxury hotels as orchestrators in luxury gastronomic business ecosystems, this paper adopts a qualitative approach, i.e. the exploratory analysis of a single case study: the Italian high-end hotel Borgo Egnazia.

Findings – The paper highlights the main capabilities developed by the orchestrator: relational, combinative and promotional capabilities.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is among the first studies to explore what capabilities are needed by a company to orchestrate a destination that builds its product and service offerings upon the local food culture.

Keywords Business ecosystem, Gastronomy, Luxury hotel, Orchestrator, Capabilities

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Gastronomic travel is experiencing great growth, attracting elite and business travelers as well as other segments of the tourism market fascinated by local cuisines (Batat, 2021; Taheri and Gannon, 2019). Following this trend, Vrontis *et al.* (2016) called for more insights into the role of local players who recognize and exploit opportunities arising from culinary tourism, because traditional food can be considered a unique resource for travel destinations (Mariani *et al.*, 2021).



Among the different protagonists involved, as stated by [Gordin et al. \(2016, p. 88\)](#), hotels are pivotal for gastronomic place branding because they are able “to ensure that tourists can get an authentic gastronomic experience that may result in repeat visits.” The significance of the accommodation sector in gastronomic destination development can be perceived by considering that hotels are not just the place where tourists start their journey but also the point at which they initiate their knowledge of local cooking, culture and culinary products ([Gordin et al., 2016](#); [Kaperá, 2015](#)). They can support sustainable local food networks through practices that penetrate the culinary identity of local communities ([Hillel et al., 2013](#)).

However, an analysis of existing literature on food and beverage destination development reveals marginal attention to way hotels may be determinant in building an appealing food destination and thus contributing to the development of a range of gastronomic offerings embracing a whole destination ([Bataf et al., 2019](#)). It emerges that hotels can play the part of orchestrators ([Dhanasai and Parkhe, 2006](#); [Lewis et al., 2019](#)) of business ecosystems based on unique culinary offerings but this role seems to be rather inadequately investigated. In particular, analyses of coordination mechanisms are practically absent from the literature ([Mariani, 2014](#)), even though they would be crucial to mobilizing information and resources and to engaging in cooperative processes ([Lemmetynen and Go, 2009](#)). In other words, it is still not clear how hotels can manage to orchestrate the development of a destination, despite the increasing evidence of firms driving the development of certain destinations ([Elvekrok et al., 2022](#)). This aspect, indeed, deserves further attention because identifying the characteristics that allow the orchestrator to boost the emergence of an ecosystem and its appeal could be of interest to both academics and practitioners. In particular, we refer to the characteristics of orchestrators as their capabilities, which constitute the know-how that enables organizations to perform activities and generate outputs ([Salvato and Rerup, 2011](#)) and in line with the resource-based view (RBV), the “tangible and intangible assets firms use to develop and implement their strategies” ([Ray et al., 2004, p. 24](#)).

Accordingly, this paper seeks to fill this gap in the literature by conceptualizing a *local gastronomic business ecosystem* (LGBE) and revealing the main capabilities that allow orchestrators to organize local resources to develop an LGBE. Thus, the main aim of this research is to understand which specific capabilities a luxury hotel needs to possess to develop and orchestrate the bundling of local complementors to supply a rewarding destination experience based on culinary resources.

To achieve this purpose, we carried out qualitative research by analyzing an exploratory case study of the Borgo Egnazia hotel, located in the Itria Valley, a travel destination in the Apulia Region in the south of Italy. It was included in the Top 15 European Resort Hotels in 2020. This high-end hotel bases its entire range of product and service offerings on local traditions, by designing activities that reflect the local culture of the Apulia region, its traditional attitudes, values, beliefs and products and this has been decisive in making the area of the Itria Valley a competitive destination in the last decade ([Pasquale, 2019](#)). Indeed, arrivals and overnight stays throughout the whole region in 2017 and 2019 posted yearly growth of +13% and +8% in those two years, respectively.

The Itria Valley covers 532.20 square kilometers [1], from the cliffs of the Ionian Sea to the Adriatic coast, including rolling hills and monumental groves of olive trees. Although it was not considered an international tourism destination in the past, in recent years, it has made a powerful entrance into this segment, thanks to determined and visionary entrepreneurs ([Pasquale, 2019](#)). Our findings have revealed three types of capabilities Borgo Egnazia has developed when working as an LGBE orchestrator in this geographic area. These

can be defined as relational capabilities, combinative capabilities and promotional capabilities. Regarding the relational capabilities, we found two specific types: “collaboration with local stakeholders” and “dialogue with institutions.” We termed the combinative capabilities “enhancement of local productions.” Finally, we refer to promotional capabilities as “promotion of local offerings.”

This research marks an advancement compared to the previous literature regarding the link between luxury hotels and gastronomic destination development (Batat, 2021) because it enriches the debate surrounding the role of hotels as orchestrators in shaping an LGBE. Indeed, we reveal how the development of an LGBE starts at the organizational level and what capabilities determine it.

The paper is organized as follows. After this introduction, we present a review of the available literature regarding the role of orchestrators in developing fashionable destinations. This is followed by an examination of the capabilities that characterize orchestrators. The sections that follow present our methodology and results. Finally, in the conclusion, implications for both theory and practice are detailed.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Local gastronomic business ecosystem, its development and orchestration

Destination competitiveness is not a static concept, but rather changes over time depending on developments in information and communication technologies or demand for sustainability or authenticity (Goffi *et al.*, 2019; Neto *et al.*, 2020). Travel destinations, indeed, have increasingly been developing differentiation strategies because of increasing competition (Line and Wang, 2017).

Among the different resources used to differentiate the products and services they offer, in recent years, culinary heritage has come to the forefront for academics and practitioners around the world (Jebotip, 2021; Mariani and Okumus, 2022), as it is often central when consumers choose a tourist destination (López-Guzmán *et al.*, 2017). It has been found to be a strategic element that influences a territory’s brand (UNWTO, 2012) and thus it gives rise to a competitive strategy that combines the rhetoric of authenticity with the sense of place (Scarpato and Daniele, 2003). Food heritage may be a good selling proposition and may boost the destination’s appeal and the authenticity of tourist experience. It can then become a critical pull factor for tourists (Sims, 2009), motivate them to stay longer at that destination (Hall and Mitchell, 2006) and help increase its attractiveness by contributing to reinforcing local identity (Gordin *et al.*, 2016; Hall and Gossling, 2016). This means that culinary tourism is strictly connected with a destination’s attractiveness and the promotion of local food culture (Santos *et al.*, 2020). It also means that food aptly represents the history, habits and traditions of a local community and landscape (Sims, 2009).

Focusing on the food value chain, the creation of a “foodie” destination may include an array of activities that range from the economy and the image of a place to offering an experience that provides an exchange of culture and knowledge (López-Guzmán and Sánchez-Cañizares, 2012). As a matter of fact, a destination that values authentic local cuisine may make it possible to reinforce competitiveness because this resource becomes a major driver of diversification and defines the regional brand and image (Everett and Aitchison, 2008; Kivela and Crotts, 2006; Rousta and Jamshidi, 2020). This is particularly true for the luxury segment, where tourists increasingly look for experiences connected to their passions and personal satisfaction (Iloranta, 2019). The food sector serves this purpose because it has an impact on the “cognitive and emotional pleasure consumers gain from savoring the multisensory, communal and cultural meanings of food experience” (Batat *et al.*, 2019, p. 392). Building its position on the basis of its culinary vocation can thus be a good strategy for a destination seeking to distinguish itself from its competitors. To do this,

it needs to create a business ecosystem that brings stakeholders together in offering a complete mix of products and services. Indeed, a business ecosystem is a network of players with several horizontal relationships that, all together, deliver a product or a service to customers (Clarysse *et al.*, 2014). A destination ecosystem, in particular, is described as:

A system of interdependent value-creating actors that partake in combining and integrating resources in activities that provide a multitude of composite offerings a tourist can experience and co-create, within a shared institutional context (Ness, 2021, p. 28).

Following on this literature, we argue that destinations that base their offerings on gastronomic services should involve a multitude of players in delivering these experiences to tourists. In other words, they should be able to generate an ecosystem of businesses to horizontally integrate their resources to offer a coherent and integrated product-service system. This ecosystem is defined here as a LGBE and it should include a series of different elements needed to create integrated cuisine-based offerings in the form of a system (Meneguel *et al.*, 2019).

Some examples include ethnic and historical food routes, product-based itineraries, gourmet trails, gastronomic journeys, workshops, congresses, fairs, exhibitions and food museums. This complex mix of elements requires coordination on the part of a number of stakeholders to create a coherent set of product-service offerings and an image that comprises the whole food supply chain. It follows that the process of developing an LGBE requires the management and integration of different resources belonging to different players (Aarstad *et al.*, 2015). This particular condition leads to the need to assemble and develop an interorganizational network (Paquin and Howard-Grenville, 2013). Being members of the network allows organizations to grow together, thereby creating values and opportunities for all network members and for the destination itself (Del Chiappa and Presenza, 2013; Sanz-Ibáñez *et al.*, 2019). However, creating the entire network depends on the effectiveness of the coordination of all the individual participants involved (Baggio *et al.*, 2010; Presenza *et al.*, 2014). In turn, this coordination activity allows destinations to develop new products and services by integrating multiple actors (Aarstad *et al.*, 2015). Coordination is a process that needs to be managed by a hub-player, as pioneering organizations have strong and numerous ties at the destination level (García-Villaverde *et al.*, 2020). Such organizations are defined in the literature as orchestrators (Dhanasai and Parkhe, 2006; Paquin and Howard-Grenville, 2013). Orchestration is the “set of actions undertaken by a hub firm as it seeks to create and extract value from the network” (Dhanasai and Parkhe, 2006, p. 659). An orchestrator’s actions are determinant for networks because it intercepts the interests of a community, develops common goals and engages different actors to improve the destination (Paquin and Howard-Grenville, 2013). The destination orchestrator creates value by aiding collaboration among different stakeholders, connecting demand and supply and facilitating interactions and transactions (Stienmetz and Fesenmaier, 2019). In other words, it triggers the development of strategies that seek to increase the competitiveness of the destination (Crouch and Ritchie, 1999; Stienmetz and Fesenmaier, 2019). This aspect is fundamental in developing an LGBE, as all the relevant factors “need to be integrated to construct a meaning for the destination, which is shared between consumers, members of relevant reference groups and the general population” (Lewis *et al.*, 2019, p. 213). In this sense, the role of supply-side actors is determinant in planning, developing and promoting products and services (Lewis *et al.*, 2019; Presenza *et al.*, 2019). Some of these players may also act as orchestrators in developing a range of products and services that takes all the specificities of the destination into account, thus giving it a consistent identity for customers (Kock *et al.*, 2016). Batat (2021) has shown how luxury

companies – specifically, haute cuisine restaurants – can play a role as orchestrators in the “gastronomization” of destinations by improving their image and enhancing their attractiveness at the national and international level.

In other words, orchestrators are determinant actors in developing an LGBE. However, developing a full understanding of the characteristics that define these players is still a frequently overlooked topic. This study aims to fill this gap by revealing the main capabilities that characterize a luxury hotel working to orchestrate the resources of an LGBE.

2.2 Capabilities of an local gastronomic business ecosystem orchestrator

An orchestrator is a business that can assemble a network of resources that may drive both business performance and value for society (Hitt *et al.*, 2011). It refers to a central or hub actor that extracts value from a network by applying a mix of deliberate and purposeful actions.

The resource orchestration framework holds that value creation and the sustainability of a competitive advantage for firms are not simply connected to the ownership of static resources, but rather that the dynamic deployment and orchestration of resources by firms is also absolutely pivotal (Barney *et al.*, 2011). Managers should structure and bundle these resources to develop organizational capabilities and leverage them for value creation (Sirmon *et al.*, 2011). The RBV defines organizational capabilities as those that refer to the “ability of an organization to perform a coordinated set of tasks, using organizational resources, for the purpose of achieving a particular end result” (Helfat and Peteraf, 2003, p. 999); in this case, it is for the purpose of developing and orchestrating an LGBE. The orchestrator must rely not only on its internal resources but also on external relationships and networks (Scuotto *et al.*, 2017). It has to work to create motivation in its environment, intervening in the strategic actions of those working within it (Stienmetz and Fesenmaier, 2019). In the field of destination management, this calls for the orchestrator’s ability to establish ongoing relationships within the ecosystem by engaging all the stakeholders involved in shared goals, motivations and knowledge, to create value in a co-evolution process (Melis *et al.*, 2022; Rodríguez-Díaz and Espino-Rodríguez, 2008). It also makes it necessary to expand products through innovation (Sanz-Ibáñez and Clavé, 2016) and encourage the enhancement of service standards through competition and cooperation (Bosworth and Farrell, 2011). Moreover, the actors in charge of developing and managing travel destinations should possess the capability to manage different stakeholders and spread their knowledge of the competitive environment and possible future trends affecting the market (Sheehan *et al.*, 2016).

This implies the development and transformation of local resources into tourism products and services, which fosters the participation of other players – both private and public (Melis *et al.*, 2022). It encompasses critical factors such as building and sustaining collaborative relationships, factors that ease or hinder collaboration and the effects caused by these collaborative activities (Naipaul *et al.*, 2009). To face all these challenges, orchestrators need to develop specific capabilities (Teece *et al.*, 1997) because – as argued by Teece (2007) – businesses with strong capabilities not only adapt to their ecosystems but also influence them through innovation and collaboration with other stakeholders.

In the tourism domain, capabilities have been found to be the key drivers of innovation and development both for tourism companies (Camisón and Monfort-Mir, 2012) and destinations (Lemmetynen and Go, 2009; Rodríguez-Díaz and Espino-Rodríguez, 2008; Sainaghi *et al.*, 2019). They can be determinant in maximizing a destination’s culinary popularity and its ability to develop new culinary products and services (Duarte Alonso *et al.*, 2018). A strong orientation in favor of the diversification, intensification and connection of destination products through well-combined key attractors, services and

experiences will strengthen the competitiveness and sustainability of the destination (Benur and Bramwell, 2015). In this context, the process of leveraging resources is strategic for destinations that want to take advantage of economies of scope rather than economies of scale. Indeed, destination capabilities should be directed at developing new products and improving brand reputation (Sainaghi *et al.*, 2019). Orchestrators should create and manage a system that relies on relationships and the combination of diverse resources from different actors. They must cultivate their capabilities at shaping, mixing and improving resources to exploit emergent opportunities, orchestrating them carefully to amplify their multiplicative power (Dhanasai and Parkhe, 2006).

Based on the above literature, we argue that luxury hotels are the segment that can achieve this result because they have both the resources needed to invest in research and development activities and the strength to compose a valuable bundle of products and services to offer tourists. In the following section, we present and then develop the analysis we have used to explore the capabilities required and identify the practices underlying them.

3. Research design

3.1 Case study description

We chose luxury hotel Borgo Egnazia for this case study. Its numerous facilities include six different restaurants that base their entire culinary proposition and positioning on different combinations of ingredients and traditional dishes. Recognized as one of the best hotels in the world [2], over the years, it has carried out activities that have led a whole ecosystem of connected stakeholders to offer luxury gastronomic experiences to tourists at this destination.

This case can be considered both a critical and extreme one (Eisenhardt, 1989; Pratt, 2009) in the study of LGBE orchestrators, for a number of reasons relating to theory. First, scholars have been paying ever greater attention to the interplay between hotels and local culinary traditions (Bondzi-Simpson and Ayeh, 2019), because food heritage has become a reliable resource on which to build competitive advantage (Mariani *et al.*, 2021). Second, cuisine affects tourist experiences at a specific location (Kivela and Crotts, 2006) and so hotels that develop LGBEs contribute to both their business and to that of stakeholders by enhancing the position of both their firm and the destination. Finally, Apulian culinary customs have recently been studied as representative of a cuisine rooted in culture, history and identity (Renna *et al.*, 2015), which is increasingly successful in attracting tourists (Pasquale, 2019). Thus, it is a perfect setting for our analysis. Within the geographic area of the Itria Valley, Borgo Egnazia is widely recognized as the orchestrator of this development. In fact, this hotel's exponential growth over the past decade and its role in improving this travel destination make it a perfect case for studying the role of luxury hotels in triggering the development of a gourmet destination. This central role was confirmed in the words of *i8*, CEO and founder of Borgo Egnazia, in his interview: "This destination did not exist before. We built it over time and local administrations have always supported us. Our dialogue with them is fundamental."

3.2 Data collection

Our qualitative research is based on an in-depth case study, as this methodology is well suited to the inductive aim of our research (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). We collected data between September 2019 and January 2020. In addition, we conducted an additional interview in October 2021 with one of the key stakeholders of Borgo Egnazia, the mayor of Fasano, the village in which the hotel is located. To build a convincing and reliable case, we used different sources to collect primary and secondary data. Triangulation between these different data sources allowed us to develop a robust and reliable analysis (Decrop, 1999; Siggelkow, 2007).

We started by collecting archival records, i.e. newspaper and magazine articles available online. Most of these articles were found in the press section of Borgo Egnazia’s main website. A total of 116 different articles were analyzed. We also collected data through official websites and YouTube channels. Furthermore, we analyzed 17 reports provided by Borgo Egnazia that include detailed information about the hotel and its activities. Collecting this information allowed the authors to support the other sources of information acquired (Salvato and Corbetta, 2013).

We visited Borgo Egnazia in December 2019 and January 2020, when we collected primary data via 14 semi-structured interviews with owners and managers and with one of the main stakeholders (Table 1), along with in-depth observations of all the units comprised in the hotel. Direct observation during our three visits at the hotel allowed us to extract value from an “insider” perspective (Locke, 2011). For example, during interviews, we asked respondents to talk about the products and services developed and offered by Borgo Egnazia, if and how external stakeholders were involved in their development process and if they had additional purposes besides mere financial performance. This kind of open-ended questions allowed them to answer freely, contributing their personal perspective to the discussion. In this way, each of them gave us a different viewpoint, depending on their position within the hotel, on how Borgo Egnazia was able to develop the range of products and services offered while orchestrating the involvement of different actors at the destination. Interestingly, even informants not directly in charge of any functions related to food and beverage contributed elements regarding the role the hotel had played in the development of an ecosystem of food-related actors. Given our aim to investigate the capabilities of the orchestrator, i.e. its internal characteristics, 13 members of the organization were interviewed. These interviews allowed the authors to have a clear picture of the phenomenon under investigation from an insider perspective. The wealth of sources used was fundamental to identify the main issues and ensure data triangulation (Decrop, 1999). In addition, one further interview was conducted later on to have initial feedback from an external perspective. This interview gave us the chance to explore topics that had not emerged previously.

3.3 Data analysis

Interviews were manually coded independently by three researchers. Afterwards, the results of the coding were compared and produced 86% similarity. The remaining 14% of interview data was further analyzed jointly by the three researchers to develop a shared framework. A

Table 1.
Informants and their
position in the
company

When	Where	Interview’s duration	Informant	Position
Dec-19	Borgo Egnazia	46 min	<i>i1</i>	Executive Chef
Dec-19	Borgo Egnazia	55 min	<i>i2</i>	Director of Wellness Center
Dec-19	Borgo Egnazia	1 h 14 min	<i>i3</i>	Sales Director
Dec-19	Borgo Egnazia	56 min	<i>i4</i>	Events Director
Dec-19	Borgo Egnazia	53 min	<i>i5</i>	Finance Director
Dec-19	Borgo Egnazia	42 min	<i>i6</i>	Vice President Sales and Marketing
Dec-19	Borgo Egnazia	43 min	<i>i7</i>	Asset Manager
Jan-20	Borgo Egnazia	1 h 18 min	<i>i8</i>	Owner
Jan-20	Borgo Egnazia	43 min	<i>i9</i>	Owner’s wife/Brand Protector
Jan-20	Borgo Egnazia	41 min	<i>i10</i>	Director of Food and Beverage
Jan-20	Borgo Egnazia	1 h 25 min	<i>i11</i>	Vice President Operations
Jan-20	Borgo Egnazia	1h	<i>i12</i>	Talent Director
Feb-20	Borgo Egnazia	45 min	<i>i13</i>	Owners’ mother/Shareholder and Founder
Oct-21	Online meeting	46 min	<i>i14</i>	Mayor of Fasano

comparative analysis approach was then used with the different kinds of data (Dyer and Nobeoka, 2000). This methodology is widely used in management studies and allows researchers to constantly compare data from different sources and constantly adjust conceptual categories and emerging theoretical concepts until theoretical saturation is reached (Browning *et al.*, 1995; Hayes *et al.*, 2020; Strauss and Corbin, 1997). In other words, this has proven to be a good method to achieve a convincing and reliable level of data triangulation. In this paper, comparative analysis allowed the authors to identify three capabilities developed by Borgo Egnazia when performing its role as orchestrator. To ensure the quality of our case study findings, we conducted between-method data triangulation to capture the phenomena investigated through different sources (Cappa *et al.*, 2022; Denzin, 2012; Yin, 1994).

4. Findings

Table 2 reports the capabilities that emerged from our analysis. They underlie Borgo Egnazia’s role as the orchestrator of its LGBE and the group these capabilities pertain to. They are presented below.

4.1 Relational capabilities

The role of the orchestrator should be a relational one as it connects a number of players at the destination. Borgo Egnazia is able to weave relationships with other firms and institutions in its geographic area. Regarding other businesses, Borgo Egnazia develops relationships with local food suppliers and with its competitors. This should be seen as shared value logic, where benefitting competitors in their local community means benefitting the whole destination through the success of a larger number of players that share similar food sector products, services and positioning. This appears evident in the words of *i1*, the executive chef at Borgo Egnazia:

The local community has opened itself up to us. As the Borgo Egnazia chef, I am often invited to share the successful experience of our restaurants with other hotels at local meetings. I am proud to do so.

Consistent with the above, this orchestrator is open to their geographic area in the sense that their main goal is the development of the whole geographic destination. They are aware that the prosperity of other local players will increase along with their own success and that this is beneficial for the whole geographic area as well as for business profits. In line with this logic, when it proposes food and wine experiences for its guests, Borgo Egnazia designs activities that involve other restaurants and hotels in the local area. *i3*, the hotel’s sales director, said:

It is a connected and open place. Many of our customers go out for dinner at restaurants that we recommend to them. For us this is a loss in absolute value terms, but it is a significant gain for the destination.

Type of capability	Capability
Relational capabilities	Collaboration with local stakeholders Dialogue with institutions
Combinative capabilities	Enhancement of local productions
Promotional capabilities	Promotion of local offerings

Table 2.
Capabilities of Borgo
Egnazia functioning
as LGBE orchestrator

Relationships consequently also mean sacrificing part of their revenues to generate benefits in the long run. We define this relational capability as *collaboration with local stakeholders*. The mayor of Fasano, *i14*, also confirmed this capability on the part of Borgo Egnazia:

They send tourists to other businesses in the area to allow them to experience our vineyards or teach them how to cook traditional dishes. To do this they rely on collaborations with local producers who are able to offer high quality experiences.

The openness of Borgo Egnazia and its willingness to collaborate and share its experiences with local partners and competitors are characteristics that ensure the hotel can create strong relationships while also being beneficial for local stakeholders, who can be inspired and even imitate their example to some extent. This openness works, however, because the orchestrator is really representative of the area and is able to convey a message of authenticity. According to *i11*, the general manager: "In recent years the local area has begun identifying with what we are doing because it has become so representative of the place."

In addition, Borgo Egnazia has also been able to establish and maintain solid relationships with local institutions. On the one hand, these relationships have allowed the orchestrator to develop its business by simplifying bureaucratic processes. The CEO and founder, *i8*, said:

Without the support of local administrations, this project would not exist because there was a fairly complex administrative process in place that was sped up thanks to our and their desire to get this venture going.

In addition, local administrators allow Borgo Egnazia to actively participate in certain strategic decision. As *i14* said:

Recently we had to plan new public lighting and Borgo Egnazia asked us to include some changes to the plan for tourism purposes. We were happy to collaborate with them and accepted their suggestions.

From another viewpoint, local government has had the opportunity to exploit the work done by the orchestrator to start building themselves up as a travel destination and develop tourism attractions for the whole area. Indeed, *i14* confirms that:

Before Borgo Egnazia's foundation, our area was not perceived as a travel destination. After them, however, many other companies have been founded and this has given us the chance to develop our tourism strategy for the destination as a whole.

Indeed, the Itria Valley is now considered a luxury travel destination among international markets, whereas before the opening of Borgo Egnazia it suffered from relatively weak tourism attractions and positioning. We define this additional relational capability as *dialogue with institutions*. This dialogue also becomes fundamental for the future development of a gastronomic business ecosystem and in general for the whole travel destination. Indeed, as *i14* said:

Borgo Egnazia produced an economic earthquake in positive terms. As administrators, we are now partnering with them and with other stakeholders, such as universities, to create a center of excellence for competences to educate local people on how to offer high quality hospitality services.

Thus, the economic effects of Borgo Egnazia's orchestration have also fueled the development of its LGBE by adding knowledge and competences to the system to ensure long-term benefits for the local area and its people.

4.2 *Combinative capabilities*

Another set of core capabilities for an orchestrator to successfully manage an LGBE is a combinative capability. To develop a range of product and service offerings that represent a geographic area well, an orchestrator cannot solely initiate and maintain solid relationships with local stakeholders. It must also propose new offerings that combine the diversities and specificities already present in the local community. From this perspective, Borgo Egnazia has built its entire proposition on innovative products that are combinations of traditional elements sourced from different members of their local community. As can be read in one of the documents provided by the hotel, “Each of our preparations is homemade, created by starting from a fruit or an aromatic herb harvested by local producers in the Apulian countryside.” *i10* also said that:

We target small local producers that provide products that have no fashion value. Instead of buying tuna, we buy mullets, which are typical in our nearby sea. In this way we improve the standing of our local resources as we build a unique mix of products and services.

This explains how Borgo Egnazia combines resources from its surroundings to build products that reflect the specificities of that geographic area. In this way, it generates indirect benefits for the local community. In addition, Borgo Egnazia also incorporates offerings from beyond its own business boundaries. As *i4*, the events director, said, “We select a number of restaurants in the area and we recommend them to our customers as dining destinations. This contributes to the whole gastronomic experience of the destination.” This aspect was confirmed and expanded by the mayor of Fasano, *i14*:

Borgo Egnazia’s chef is doing an incredible job. He manages to make our local culinary traditions stand out by creating a relationship between world class hospitality excellence and local farmers.

Thus, the combinative capability of orchestrating an LGBE is the firm’s ability to select the best raw materials provided by local suppliers – those that reflect the specificities and excellence of the land. This means a true combination of local supplies to create a unique selling proposition that may instantly be recognized by tourists as that of the LGBE. In other words, the orchestrator combines different providers and thus generates benefits shared throughout the travel destination. The combination of local ingredients to create new products and the combination of other suppliers of food experiences in their local area make for the combinative capability of Borgo Egnazia, which we define as *enhancement of local productions*.

4.3 *Promotional capabilities*

The first step in developing an LGBE is building a coherent, valuable and shared product offering. However, it is not sufficient to position a travel destination on the market and just make sales. To do so, the destination needs to be promoted through marketing investments. These investments may include, for example, participation in fairs and exhibitions. Our findings suggest that Borgo Egnazia works in this way. As *i8* said:

After building our basic offering, we started attracting international markets. We began with the closest ones, like Germany and the UK and then we reached out to the rest of Europe and the USA. Ten years ago, no American tourists would visit the Itria Valley. Now international tourists constitute 75% of our customers.

Another aspect determining the promotional capabilities of Borgo Egnazia is the ability to generate positive feelings and word-of-mouth recommendations among their customers. *i4* said that:

We constantly convey the authenticity and tradition of our gastronomic products to our customers through storytelling. This makes them want to visit the whole area and stay for many days.

The two mechanisms described here show that the orchestrator communicates regarding the local area as a whole to position it at the high end of the market, making visitors want to stay longer and have experiences throughout the whole area, rather than just promoting its own amenities. We define this capability as the *promotion of local offerings*. Once again, *i14* also confirmed what had been highlighted by the hotel managers:

Borgo Egnazia had the intuition to promote the local community, telling the market about the food experiences that we have to offer. And tourists are crazy about walking through our olive groves or picking vegetables from local farms.

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1 Conclusions

The aim of this study was to shed light on the role a hotel can have as the orchestrator of a travel destination that bases its offerings on authentic and unique gastronomic resources, because local cuisine is increasingly considered a unique destination resource (Mariani *et al.*, 2021). We argue that this kind of destination can be better described as an ecosystem of actors, which we define here as a luxury gastronomic business ecosystem, or LGBE. Indeed, a destination that bases the range of products and services that it offers on food experiences should be capable of developing a network of actors working toward common and shared goals to deliver valuable and innovative products (Aarstad *et al.*, 2015; Haugland *et al.*, 2011). In this context, orchestrators are central protagonists that can develop and manage the ecosystem of players around a specific kind of offering, i.e. the food and wine sector (Jebotip, 2021; Meneguel *et al.*, 2019). Our qualitative analysis in this case study of the Italian hotel Borgo Egnazia allowed us to understand the capabilities needed by the orchestrator to develop their LGBE in a world in which tourists increasingly seek authentic culinary experiences (Batat *et al.*, 2019). By analyzing primary and secondary data, collected both within and outside the hotel, we found that, to properly develop a destination with these capacities, organizations needed to develop four capabilities belonging to three different categories, as shown in Figure 1.

Relational capabilities and combinative capabilities (Kogut and Zander, 1992; Lorenzoni and Lipparini, 1999; Rodríguez-Díaz and Espino-Rodríguez, 2008) ensure the effective management of different resources from different actors in the destination community (Aarstad *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, relational and combinative capabilities reflect the ones required of orchestrators to manage a complex network of players (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen and Nätti, 2018) and they are necessary to integrate the mix of products and services offered in a business ecosystem. The gastronomic system of a destination, by its nature, is a fragmented one (Hillel *et al.*, 2013) and it needs to be integrated by protagonists capable of coordinating diverse local food suppliers, to allow them to build a coherent offering that will be rewarded by the market (López-Guzmán *et al.*, 2017). In addition, orchestrators should also be able to promote the destination and its components (Sainaghi *et al.*, 2019). This calls for an additional capability on the part of an LGBE orchestrator, which we identify as promotional capability.

With reference to relational capabilities, we identified *collaboration with local stakeholders* and *dialogue with institutions*. In the first case, the orchestrator develops its culinary offerings through local sourcing and it shares its stories with its competitors. This capability allows it to spread knowledge throughout the destination community, so that

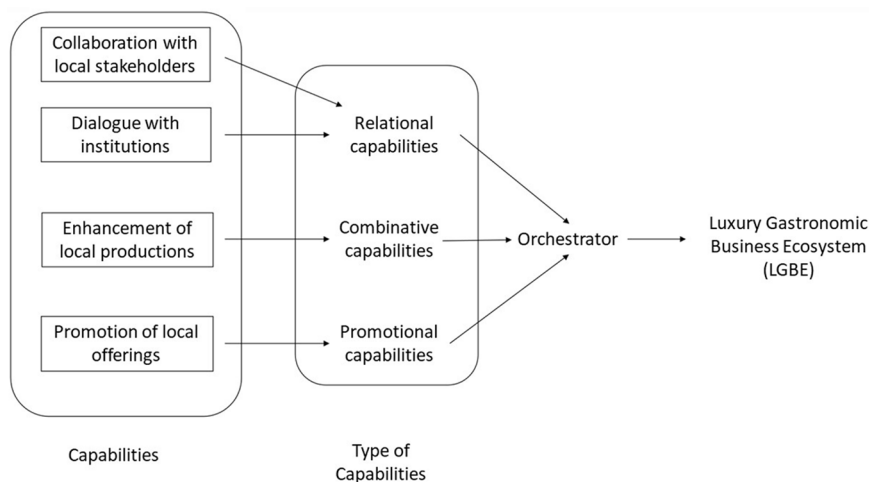


Figure 1.
Capabilities and
types of capabilities
of an LGBE
orchestrator

members of the ecosystem can be exposed to success stories that may influence them in developing gourmet product offerings based on the same or similar principles. In practical terms, the orchestrator builds up its proposition by involving other producers that, by adapting to market needs, enhance their own offerings in a manner that is consistent with the roadmap laid out by the orchestrator. This effect leads many local businesses to follow the orchestrator in a shared product and service proposition, which makes the multitude of fragmented actors become a luxury business ecosystem that, in turn, develops into a successful tourist destination. On the other hand, *dialogue with institutions* allows the orchestrator to also make the various levels of government aware of the relevance of their gastronomic proposition. The evidence provided by the stakeholder interviewed for our analysis showed that the openness of local institutions to this proposition is determinant in developing an LGBE, which needs to be managed at the administrative level in addition to being promoted by a local business, i.e. the orchestrator. As a matter of fact, this kind of collaboration is also a means to bring new knowledge to the destination community. This is needed to create the high level of hospitality expected by tourists and also to sustain a competitive advantage over time through the development of food and hospitality sector innovation and competences (Franco et al., 2022).

The combinative capability refers to the *enhancement of local productions*. To an extent, the orchestrator actually pushes its customers to experience the whole destination so that they explore the entire range of gourmet products and services it has to offer. This does not simply refer to local producers but also to other hotels and restaurants with similar high-level propositions. This means that the orchestrator is also willing to share its customers with its competitors in its local area if these competitors are part of its LGBE. This capability is functional to making tourists stay longer at the destination and making them want to come back.

Finally, the *promotion of local offerings* is the promotional capability needed to communicate their LGBE to national and international markets. The orchestrator has two main routes to follow. First, it needs to have the strength to promote the culinary experiences offered by the destination at fairs and exhibitions. Second, it needs to build the storytelling with which it communicates the uniqueness and authenticity of the local food

and beverages, making tourists want to further explore these opportunities all over the local area.

By providing this evidence, our paper enriches the literature regarding food and wine travel destinations by merging a territorial perspective with a management one. Such a multidisciplinary approach helps to achieve a broader view of the manner in which orchestrators can develop LGBEs and of the capabilities they should possess to do so effectively.

5.2 Theoretical implications

Theoretical advances include defining the capabilities needed by LGBE orchestrators to develop, organize, manage and promote local gastronomic resources and coordinate the stakeholders concerned. In particular, our findings have confirmed the prominent role luxury hotels can play in developing attractive food and beverage tourism resources, as described by [Batat \(2021\)](#).

Our paper delivers two main contributions to the literature on the culinary tourism products and services offered at travel destinations. First, we conceptualize a luxury gastronomic business ecosystem, or LGBE, as a business ecosystem that bases the entire package of products and services it offers on quality local cuisine. Such ecosystems connect firms and local institutions in a geographic area by using their cuisine as the main attractor for the destination ([Batat, 2021](#); [Mariani and Okumus, 2022](#)). We contribute to the literature on the development of destination management by highlighting the importance of creating collaborations between private and public organizations ([Mariani and Giorgio, 2017](#); [Mariani and Kylänen, 2014](#)) in the culinary field as well. In particular, we add to this literature by showing that destinations seeking to build successful luxury food and wine propositions cannot rely simply on fragmented offerings but need to build on a coherent food culture in their communities, to ensure tourists perceive the shared value proposals throughout that local area. In this sense, LGBEs shape their whole regional territories. It means that orchestrators become significant stakeholders for their destination management organizations (DMOs). These two players have to firmly combine their strategies to create a well-integrated business ecosystem. In particular, a DMO must be aware that the development and promotion of the travel destination as a whole needs to be harmonized with the specific demands of luxury food-oriented tourism. It follows that the DMO has to work toward developing structural interventions that adapt the local tourism supply to these new market needs ([Mariani, 2020](#); [Mariani et al., 2016](#)). Second, our paper sheds light on the role of local hotels in orchestrating an ecosystem and the capabilities needed to do this ([Aarstad et al., 2015](#); [Rodríguez-Díaz and Espino-Rodríguez, 2008](#)). In particular, the orchestrator should invest in fostering its relational, combinative and promotional capabilities to bring together the destination's different resources and stakeholders around an attractive range of product and service offerings that create value for the whole local community rather than just for the firm itself. In this vein, our paper contributes to the literature on food travel destinations by revealing the capabilities needed to develop a network of actors that we define an LGBE.

5.3 Practical implications

We have shown the capabilities needed by orchestrators to develop and manage LGBEs. Orchestrators should be able to establish a central position within a network of suppliers, competitors and administrations. They should know their local area and its culinary resources well and should develop an effective range of products and services that they then need to share with their local stakeholders and promote in national and international

markets. Our results are relevant for those hoping to develop business propositions based on local food traditions and products. Given the number of actors potentially providing food and beverage offerings at a travel destination, we found that, in line with previous studies, collaboration among stakeholders is needed to offer a uniform, shared proposition (Haugland *et al.*, 2011). In particular, collaboration is required between competitors, who should develop forms of cooperation rather than competition. In this way, it is possible to generate benefits for the whole ecosystem and ensure tourists are willing to spend their holidays in different parts of the whole area, rather than just visiting one hotel or restaurant. To do that, however, orchestrators should be sure certain that their local providers are capable of offering the level of high-quality services that meet tourist expectations and that these are in line with the luxury offered by the orchestrators themselves. In turn, orchestrators should implement control mechanisms to make sure that the actors belonging to their networks continue to maintain that level of quality. To this end, ongoing collaboration with local administrators gives firms the possibility to reach out to local institutions to achieve additional results beyond their company boundaries. In the case of Borgo Egnazia, that means being able to partner with public stakeholders to build a competence center that can introduce new competences that enhance the level of local offerings, which is essential to properly develop an LGBE. In this sense, orchestrators become central players in the development of the product and service proposition offered by the whole destination. Our results suggest that their role should be complementary to that of the local DMO, which should leverage orchestrators' capabilities to develop a broader range of offerings that also includes other products from the destination not directly related to its cuisine.

5.4 Limitations and future research

This paper is not exempt from limitations. First, it only refers to the supply side of an LGBE, neglecting the perspective of demand. Future studies could try to enrich the debate by investigating tourist perceptions and experiences to understand their emotional response to the development of an LGBE. Such findings could further help researchers and practitioners to develop effective instruments to refine the development of a successful food tourism destination. Second, this paper mainly focuses on the internal environment of an organization, in line with the nature of our study. This can be considered a limitation of our research; as a matter of fact, the interview with one external stakeholder highlighted the existence of further topics that the internal perspective was unable to reveal. New studies should try to further investigate LGBEs and the behavior of their orchestrators, combining the internal perspective with external ones. In addition, the results of our qualitative analysis could be tested using quantitative studies. Scholars could analyze the dynamics that underlie the relationship between orchestrators and their stakeholders by applying network analysis methodology. From this perspective, the analysis of a single case study could also be considered a limitation and future research could apply quantitative methodology to validate our preliminary results. Moreover, new evidence could focus on different destinations that may present other peculiarities that affect that way in which orchestrators should manage their LGBEs.

Notes

1. <https://psr.regione.puglia.it/en/gal-valle-d-italia>
2. For example, Europe's Leading Luxury Hotel & Villas, Italy's Leading Family Resort. For an extensive list of the awards it has received, visit the website www.borgoegnazia.it/award/

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