

ELEVATING THE GASTRONOMIC EXPERIENCE THROUGH PERSONALIZATION, STORYTELLING, AND MEMORY CONSERVATION ON FOOD TOURS BUSINESS

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Abstract: The emergence of food tours as a form of gastronomic tourism has been on the rise in recent years, yet Greek food tours have not been widely explored from an entrepreneurial perspective. This paper explores the profile of companies that offer food tours, the characteristics of food tours, and the factors that need consideration when planning a tour for creating a culinary experience. Data was collected from a questionnaire sent to 35 gastronomic tour entrepreneurs in Greek cities with populations above 50,000, with businesses in operation for over three years. Results showed that food tours in Greece are small in size, usually 1-3 employees, with more activity during the summer months. The authenticity of local gastronomy and contact with locals is key to creating an unforgettable experience. The findings highlight the importance and potential of food tours in gastronomic tourism and suggest that the promotion of gastronomic tourism in Greece through food tours can generate synergies with the local agri-food sector by providing unique culinary experiences for tourists, while supporting local authorities in designing an appealing gastronomic profile of the destination.

Keywords: food tours, gastronomic tourism, Greek cuisine, culinary experience, entrepreneurial perspective, authenticity, local gastronomy, local agri-food sector, tourism promotion, contact with locals.

1. Introduction

Gastronomy has always been part of the tourist experience, but in recent years a growing number of tourists are consciously looking for dining experiences in specific destinations. As characteristically reported by Ab Karim and Chi (2010) "There are many tourists who travel to enjoy culinary experiences. This food-related tourism activity has been designated as gastronomic tourism or culinary tourism or food tourism. These terms have the same meaning as people travel to a specific destination to find local food" (OECD, 2012: ch. 12).

Nowadays, food tours are a popular gastronomic tourism activity developed and funded by tourism businesses and supported by the tourism departments of local or regional agencies. These tours lead visitors to specific places where they can see or taste food, and try to combine public with private spaces, guiding tourists to homes, restaurants, and grocery stores (Long, 2018). The purpose of a food tour is not only the

delicious tasting of food by tourists—after all, this would be boring and monotonous—but their knowledge and contact with the culture, traditions, and habits of the locals. Essentially, food tours become links between the landscape and the food of the destination, creating a cultural atmosphere that is essential for an unforgettable travel experience (Hjalager & Richards, 2002). Food and drink add value to travelers by connecting them to other worlds, leading them to new lifestyles, and creating opportunities to find, try, and enjoy the unknown (Boniface, 2003; Long, 1998). Although food tours are a useful tool for promoting gastronomic tourism, only in the last decade has the number of businesses offering them grown steadily around the world, while there is little research on them.

The purpose of this research is to fill the research gap by giving important information about food tours in Greece. More specifically, the objectives of the research are: 1) to capture the profile of the companies that offer the tours; 2) to present the characteristics of the food tours; and 3) to highlight those factors that must be considered when planning a tour for creating a culinary experience.

This research attempts to enrich the literature on food tours in two directions. First, it seeks to fill the research gap related to these businesses, as it has been developing in recent years and there is no relevant data around them. Secondly, it approaches the issue of food tours differently, as it examines them from the point of view of the entrepreneurs who organize the tours, thus supplementing the existing bibliography that refers mainly to the gastro tourists who attend them. This research on a more practical basis guides entrepreneurs who organize and carry out the tours to focus on those areas and factors that best meet the requirements and needs of customers while offering the best possible culinary experience. Furthermore, the present research can be the trigger for the local bodies, to form an operating framework for the companies that offer these tours and at the same time integrate them into the strategy of promoting gastronomic tourism for the promotion of their local gastronomy.

The article includes the following sections: in the second section, the theoretical framework concerning the gastronomic experience of food tours is developed through an extensive literature review, while in the third section the research methodology is described. The presentation of results is presented in the fourth section and the article concludes in the fifth section by discussing the conclusions, limitations, and suggestions for further research. The scientific and practical contribution of the research results is also included in this section.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining Food Tours

Research around food tours is very limited and therefore no specific definition has been given yet. However, those who have been involved have tried to approach them descriptively to make their content clear.

Food tours are an emerging idea in gastronomic tourism that concerns the development of activities with unique and exciting experiences for tourists. More specifically, a food tour is defined as an activity of gastronomic tourism organized by a company, in which the participants experience the destination, mainly through the local gastronomic culture and food customs. The tour combines storytelling and the culture of the destination with sightseeing and dining. Guides accompany small groups of tourists to show them the “true side” of the destination with themed tours of restaurants and bars frequented by locals that tourists could not easily find on their own. Food guides play an important role “as a bridge” between tourists and destinations, as they create additional value through the personalization of the experience for each participant (Ko, 2015).

The goal of a food tour is not just to enjoy the food. If the tour was limited to this, then tourists would easily get bored and complete the route very quickly. The goal of a tour is to be fun, while at the same time

informative, and sometimes educational, giving answers to questions that also respond to cultural knowledge. Visitors expect different things from the tours (for example chefs do research, journalists want to learn about local culture, etc.) and food tour operators try to make a personalized experience for all these groups (OECD, 2012: ch. 12)resulting in participants learning in depth about the local culture through its cuisine, restaurants and food customs (Ko, 2015).

Food tours increase accessibility to local businesses known to locals but difficult to spot and be organized by the tourists themselves, as they are unfamiliar with the destination and include a variety of activities such as eating local products and drinks, participating in gastronomic feasts, and festivals, cooking lessons, visits to farms and wineries, restaurants and bars and local markets (Ko, 2015)creating a package for a complete gastronomic experience for the convenience of tourists.

2.2. Business Food Tour's Identity

The food tour companies, which are an important part of gastronomic tourism, are responsible for the tourist's contact with the food/gastronomy and the culture of a place, through the guides they employ, seek the maximum satisfaction of the participants from their gastronomic experience. As Chang et al. (2011)claim it is the guide's responsibility to be present during meals to ensure that the meal is served properly, to act as a translator if they can not communicate with the serving staff, and to facilitate the dining experience in general. It often acts as a substitute for the tracker, mentor, leader, mediator, and entertainer who provides protection, and safety and promotes group interaction(Cohen, 1985;Holloway, 1981).

The guide of a food tour must have extensive knowledge not only of local history and culture, but also of the food culture, customs, and eating habits of the destination. They should also be able to make suggestions that will satisfy the preferences of tourists, to more easily achieve overall satisfaction with the food due to the reliability of their recommendations. The guide's knowledge and communication of the local food culture are vital to fulfilling the desire of tourists to acquire a higher level of cultural capital, as for them travel is more than just a process of physical nutrition, also a means of cultural knowledge through the local cuisine. The guide can therefore add value to the experience by interpreting the culture of the destination, suggesting foods that suit personal preferences, and facilitating the reduction of linguistic and cultural barriers(Ko, 2015).

2.3. Characteristics of Food Tours

The duration of the tours offered to tourists varies from country to country. Specifically, according to the research by Garibaldi et al. (2017), in America food tours companies offer mainly day tours, in France short tours of 2 - 3 days are predominant, while in Italy and Spain companies prefer to offer packages of medium and long tours lasting from 4 to 20 days.

Moreover, in the same research, it is reported that the offered tours are mainly done with buses that have a guide, while the percentages that prefer minibusses and car tours or bicycle routes are even smaller. The percentage that chooses walking/climbing routes, train routes, or routes that include extreme sports is quite small (Garibaldi et al., 2017).

In another study, Wing (2011) presents the food tours that take place in SanDiego and reports that they cover about 2.2 miles (2.25 kilometers) of downtown. Guests can walk about 2.5 to 3 hours to visit six different local restaurants or grocery stores. Throughout the trip, tourists can try a variety of dishes ranging from fresh pastries, seafood, a variety of cheeses and wines, and of course dessert. Along the way, visitors "learn about the architecture of historic buildings, listen to stories about the area and try national cuisine from 5 - 7 restaurants" (Wing, 2011).

In Italy, food tours seem to combine gastronomic and cultural activities and offer a wide variety of experiences such as cooking lessons, meals in famous restaurants, visits to farms, wineries, breweries, restaurants, food production sites, and/or specialty food. All these activities require the cooperation of producers and companies with food tour companies (Garibaldi et al., 2017; Hall et al., 2003).

Food tours are organized in different ways, they can be organized around a specific dish, such as wine, chocolate, tacos, a neighborhood, or a national approach. They may also try to combine public with private spaces, transporting tourists to homes, as well as restaurants and grocery stores (Long, 2018).

From the above, it can be understood that multilevel commitments enhance the creation of experiences that allow tourists to gather more knowledge about the place, culture, culinary behaviors, and local gastronomic identity (Boniface, 2003).

3. Important Factors for Creating a Gastronomic Experience

3.1. Personal and Nutritional Preferences of Tourists

Although the focus of food tours is to show the true, authentic side of a destination, certain levels of adaptation and mitigation must also be considered. Henderson (2009) states that recognizing and responding to the different dietary needs of tourists may involve religious beliefs with strict diet codes, less adventurous tourists with low neophobic tendencies, and different dietary preferences. More specifically, the influence of religion on dietary preferences depends on religious prohibitions on consumption, such as pork by Islamists, or, conversely, on freedom of choice, such as Christians who do not have dietary taboos (Sack, 2001).

Today tourists are better informed, more flexible with money, and with more travel experience but also interest in health issues and healthy eating habits (Hrelia, 2015). As Cohen and Avieli (2004) claim these tourists' concerns about the safety of local food create a significant barrier to the experience of the new cuisine. As a result, food neophobia shows the tendency of tourists to dislike or suspect new foods, while on the contrary food neophilia emphasizes the willingness to try new and unknown foods (Fischler, 1988; Kim et al., 2009; Mak et al., 2012, 2017) typically state that both neophobia and neophilia are strong factors influencing the consumption of local food by tourists and especially food neophobia which was extensively examined about the behavior of tourists in food (Chang et al., 2011; Mak et al., 2017), showed that it is a strong barrier that affects the taste of local cuisine and gastronomic experience (Kivela & Crotts, 2006).

Furthermore, as food tours are open for everyone to join, different groups of people from different backgrounds, cultures, and different motivations may have specific dietary and personal preferences such as vegans, tourists who eat only fish, or those who are allergic to certain foods (OECD, 2012). It is a fact that the percentage of vegetarians has increased in the last 20 years as well as that the restaurants that offer options for vegetarians, due to the perception that vegetarian food is healthy (Leitzmann, 2014). After all, one of the greatest pleasures in tourism is the opportunity to try different tasting experiences. However, for those who have health issues, such as food allergies or food sensitivities, trying new foods is uncertain or, at worst, a dangerous prospect. Tourists who want a healthy diet during their trip will, of course, adjust their dietary choices to protect their health (Hrelia, 2015).

3.2. Services Accompanied by Food

Visiting local restaurants and local food shops through the tours allows tourists to sample a variety of food and drinks while socializing not only with other visitors but also with local producers and shop owners. The companies that take part in the tours and the cuisine offered allow experiencing the new, unique, and out-of-the-ordinary contact with the gastronomic profile, the place, and its people.

Food tour businesses place special emphasis on gaining experience alongside the food and place, through the interaction of tourists with the business owners they visit, thus differentiating the classic experience of a typical meal (Everett, 2008). This emphasis that food tours give makes tourists feel special, as they feel the treatment is immediate and informative (Ko, 2015). During the opening hours of a restaurant, for example, tourists usually do not come in contact with the manager, owner, or chef of the restaurant. In food tours, however, participants can get to know them in a friendly and social atmosphere that results in the development of a direct relationship between them and the exchange of knowledge (Long, 2004). This is also confirmed by Lupton (1996), who states that food is used as a tool to develop social interaction and to create or maintain friendships or relationships, as people, along with food, socialize at the same time.

Along with the gastronomic profile of the place, the tours—being done mostly on foot—also incorporate elements, such as the location and the environment, highlighting the natural environment and attractions. In this way, tourists gain a visual sense and perception of the environment and culture of the place they visited (Urry, 1990). Thus, it seems that the entrepreneurs who develop gastronomic activities in historic buildings are strongly interested in preserving this historicity while at the same time highlighting their business activities. This “marriage” of the past with the present through the promotion of gastronomy showcase important elements of the local character as the visitor learns the tradition as well as the effect it has on the innovative way of serving food there (Bessière, 1998; Fox, 2007).

It seems that the preservation of historical roots and highlighting them is important for the self-identification of gastronomic entrepreneurs about the place and local history, while at the same time connecting and creating their gastronomic profile (Bessière, 1998). For example, in a historic building where a restaurant is located or even its interior decoration, some elements can lead to storytelling about the business itself or the place. During the foodtour, the tourist can learn through the guide how unique this restaurant is while looking at the building itself, its architecture, and its decoration, gaining a sense of the “personality” of the place. Besides, through the narration of the history of the restaurant, the visitors seek to know the storytelling of the business. In addition, combining storytelling intimacy with dining in restaurants is a good way to build a better relationship with guests (Cederholm & Hultman, 2010). This enhanced interaction between the two parties is what increases the value of the whole experience (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Thus, the gastronomy of a place is not only projected through its food but is combined with the history of its buildings and architecture as well (Fox, 2007).

In addition, there are other elements besides architecture that give meaning to a place. The brand of the restaurant, the menu, and the habits that may be local customs, all reflect the gastronomic profile that the guests know. Added to this are the opportunities offered to the tourists to watch the preparation of food and drinks firsthand by various companies that participate in the tours. So, for example, companies that produce their products, present to their visitors where and how the specific production of the products takes place. This process of monitoring the production is a way of acquainting the visitor with the culinary techniques and style of the place, and understanding its gastronomic profile, because otherwise, it is not interesting to simply be shown the way of production. Furthermore, this personal monitoring of local production enriches the tourist’s experience as it brings him closer to the origin. By consuming local products at the place where they are produced, the tourist is physically and emotionally integrated with the destination, while gaining more knowledge (Everett, 2008). This results in a comprehensive experience of the gastronomic profile of the place.

3.3. Details of the Offered Meals

The satisfaction that the tourists get through the food during a tour consists of elements related to the attractive taste and presentation, the quantity of food, the hygiene and safety in the restaurants, and the fresh ingredients. Great flavors and the food presentation consumed and a visit to a clean restaurant where they receive good service can be considered as characteristics that determine the pleasure of the tasting experience. All of these are described as important factors in the gastronomic services, while they are also a large part of the gastronomic culture (Ko, 2015).

As suggested by Bessière (1998: p. 23) food is an indicator of the profile by which a group can identify itself. This is why some of the restaurants in the food tours choose to offer the guests samples of specific dishes that better present their gastronomic profile. In addition, it is important for restaurants and grocery stores to use fresh ingredients and try to do as many things as possible from scratch, instead of using processed or pre-packaged ingredients, because these handmade qualities more strongly reflect the sense of gastronomy of the place.

Moreover, gastronomic experiences often conflict with the daily or basic food of a place, while there is a search for authenticity and differentiation from the food that tourists know (Richards, 2002). People often travel to escape from the perceived lack of authenticity in modern home life or to discover more authentic places elsewhere (Cohen, 1979). They also travel in search of authenticity and dining experiences can play an important role in supporting it by connecting place, locals, and tourists (Everett & Aitcheson, 2008). Through the interaction of meeting new and unknown foods, tourists realize the authenticity of the destination that accompanies the cuisine. In addition, they enjoy a total atmosphere that goes beyond simple culinary experiences. There is a relationship between these dimensions in tourism, as the “local” is often equated with the “authentic”. In theory, then, what many tourists are looking for is local, authentic, and new dining experiences. Young “gastronomic tourists”, as Hall (2005) explains, are looking for unique dining experiences and trying new and interesting gastronomic flavors. Authenticity in food experiences is important because of the desires of tourists that make them more attractive.

In addition, the variety of products and the differentiation of the way they are tasted, offer great value to the tours of gastronomic experiences (Chang et al., 2011). Tourists want differentiation and a variety of products to ensure unique experiences and avoid repetition. Especially the variety of dishes is a key criterion for the appreciation of local cuisine by tourists, as it provides them with new experiences different from the culture of their food. In addition to the variety of dishes, efforts should be made to differentiate meals into overall tasting experiences. The variety of food items and the variety of dishes offer great value to the range of the food tour and overall experience (Chang et al., 2011). That is why Obonoyo et al. (2013) argue that both the variety and the differentiation of contact with local products should be considered in the design of the experience and include as many relevant activities as possible such as cooking lessons, different types of catering, participatory meal preparation, visiting public markets, supermarkets and much more.

The food tour as a holistic experience must include many factors, including atmosphere, price, and quality, as they are also important determinants of satisfaction. Among them is the service that is deeply integrated into gastronomic tourism. Chang et al. (2011) report that in an organized tour context, the level of service that participants are expected to receive is significant. Even in the same research on organized tours, the speed of service was found to be another critical criterion in the evaluation of the participants regarding their travel experiences.

3.4. Elements of Preservation of Memory

In the context of tourism, the study by Chandralal and Valenzuela (2013) showed that the memories of the participants from their trip are closely related to the local food and gastronomic experiences at the destination. In addition, they report that the perceived opportunities to meet authentic local experiences enrich the memory of the trip. Similarly, Tung and Ritchie (2011) argue that the experience of local restaurants in a particular destination increases the overall tourist experience while some tourists take souvenirs as evidence of travel experiences that help significantly in preserving memory (Kong & Chang, 2012; Lin & Mao, 2015; Wilkins, 2011). These souvenirs serve as a means to relive the positive experiences of the products and food they tasted (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016).

As emotions are closely linked to memory, food evokes certain emotions in people, most likely triggering memory recall when someone tastes or smells something. Therefore, the results of these experiences tend to evoke feelings about the sensual properties of food as well as the social manifestations created during consumption (Lupton, 1996). Preparing a meal can either rekindle memories of past events or create social interactions. Thus, the chances of creating an emotionally significant memory increase when more senses are used during the experience (Lupton, 1996). Catering businesses enhance the enjoyment of experiences in places where customer-business and customer-customer interactions are created that are not typical of one-meal experiences (Everett, 2008). The experiences of tourists are constantly mediated by the social interactions between locals and tourists (Auld & Case, 1997). In other words, the “heart” of the tourist experience lies in the interaction of visitors with the locals (Reisinger & Turner, 1998). Morgan and Xu (2009) claim that this contact is the strongest recollection of the tourist experience.

Even the participation of tourists in the travel experience is an important factor in memory (Blodgett & Granbois, 1992) as it not only enhances the individual’s sensitivity to certain activities and his perception of their importance of it but also enhances the individual’s commitment to specific services or parts (McIntyre & Pigram, 1992). Features in Kim et al. (2010) study report that the level of a tourist’s involvement in the gastronomic experience increases the vivid recollection of past experiences, as food engages the tourist not just as an observer, but as a participant as well (Long, 1998).

The recollection of culinary experiences is influenced even by the general hospitality, such as the quality of services (Goolaup & Mossberg, 2017), the clean environment (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Goolaup & Mossberg, 2017), the welcoming atmosphere (Xu & Chan, 2010) and the existence of souvenirs that prolong the experiential experience (Swanson, 2004).

4. Method and Tools

4.1. Research Area and Procedure

Quantitative methods and techniques were used to achieve the research objectives. The survey was conducted among food business owners that conduct tours in the largest cities of the country, i.e. cities with a population of over 50,000 inhabitants in Greece, as there were no registered food businesstours in cities with a smaller population. According to the latest census of ESYE (2011), these cities are Athens, Thessaloniki, Patras, Heraklion, Larissa, Volos, Ioannina, Trikala, Chalkida, Serres, Alexandroupoli, Xanthi, Katerini, Agrinio, Kalamata, Kavala, Chania, Lamia, Komotini. These cities are geographically located in various regions of the country covering the nationwide food tours offer in the country.

Empirical data were collected after telephone communication with business owners through a structured questionnaire completed through the google forms. The total number of companies active in the field of food tours in these cities amounts to 35, a population that arises after the exclusion of companies based in foreign

countries and organizing tours in Greece, employing on a case-by- case basis individual guide. Finally, 25 complete and usable questionnaires were collected over a period of two months.

4.2. Questionnaire

The measurement tool included a questionnaire consisting of four sections with closed-ended questions about the identity of the food tour companies, the characteristics of the tours that take place, and a question about the importance of the factors that are considered when planning the tours using the Likert five-point scale (Very Important-5, Not at all important-1), all formed as they appear in the bibliography. Moreover, the observations made by 12 entrepreneurs in the pilot test of the questionnaire for the evaluation and understanding of the content were also used. The average time to complete the questionnaire was 15 minutes.

5. Results

5.1. Business Food Tour's Identity

Food tour businesses seem to have grown in recent years as more than half of the sample was created and operated in the last five years (76.0%). The majority of companies employ only 1 - 3 employees (56.0%) and a significant percentage (36.0%) employ 4 - 10 people, while very few employ more than 10 people (4.0%). The origin of the employees is both from the place where the company is located and the tours are carried out (52.0%) as well as from other places outside the destination (48.0%) of the food tours. The specialties of food guides tours vary and mostly they are tour guides (25.0%), tourism business managers (21.0%), economists, historians or archaeologists (15.0%), and more limited photographers and chefs. The food tour guides have not received any relevant specialized training (80.0%). Most businesses serve from 20 - 100 tourists per year (48.0%), while a significant number of them have 101 - 500 tourists (44.0%) in the tours they organize. Few companies organize tours with more than 500 - 1000 tourists (4.0%) or even more than 1000+ tourists (4.0%) per year (Table 1).

Table 1. Business food tours profile (N = 25).

Enterprise Age (years)	1 - 5	76.0
	6 - 15	24.0
	16+	0.0
The Number of employees	None	0.0
	1 - 3	60.0
	4 - 10	36.0
	>10	4.0
Origin of employees	From the area (Locals)	52.0
	Another place in Greece	48.0
	Guides	25.0
	Managers	21.0
	Economists	15.0
	Historians	15.0
	Archaeologists	15.0
The Specialty of Employees		
	Journalists	2.0
	Librarians	2.0
	Photographers	2.0
	Chefs	2.0
	Other specialties (Architects, etc.)	1.0
Employee's relevant training	Yes	20.0
	No	80.0
The number of tourists per year	20 - 100	48.0
	101 - 500	44.0
	501 - 1000	4.0
	1000+	4.0
Tourist's origin	USA	45.0
	Australia	20.0
	Asia	5.0

Antarctica	0.0
Europe	30.0

Table 2. Food tours characteristics (N = 25).

	6)
Operational days	Daily Weekends only 32.0
	0.0
	Some days a week 8.0
	By appointment 60.0
Operational period	Autumn 20.0
	Winter 4.0
	Spring 20.0
	Summer 20.0
	All year 36.0
	1 - 2 4.0
Food tour duration (hours)	2 - 3 36.0
	>3 56.0
	Daily 4.0
	On foot 60.0
Availability of food tour	By bus 25.0
	By bike 10.0
	With luxury cars 5.0
	Local restaurants and taverns 25.0
	Local product store 20.0
	Flea Markets 15.0
Participating Companies/Activities	Cafes and Bars 10.0
	Wineries 10.0
	Cooking Workshops 7.0
	Festivals-Festivals of local products 5.0
	Producers of local products 5.0
	Olive mills 3.0
The language used on food tours	

Promotional Tools of Food tours	Greek	80.0
	English	20.0
	Social media	60.0
	Tourist promotion websites	15.0
	Travel agencies abroad	15.0
	Magazines-Newspapers	10.0

Table 3. Factors considered when designing a food tour for a memorable gastronomic experience.

Please note the importance of each factor in planning a food tour	1: Not at all significant (%)	2	3	4	5: A lot significant (%)	Means	D
Personal and nutritional preferences of tourists	8	20	8	36	28	3.6	
Health issues							
Religious beliefs	12	20	24	24	20	3.4	
Neophobic trends	12	4	32	36	16	3.4	
Neophilic preferences	4	20	28	24	0	2.7	
Dietary preferences	20	40	16	12	12	2.6	
Services accompanied by food							
Contact with locals	0	4	0	16	80	4.7	4
Local culture	4	8	12	16	60	4.2	4
Contact with owners/chefs	0	4	12	52	32	4.1	4
Product/business storytelling	0	4	28	28	40	4.0	4
Architectural references	4	12	32	28	24	3.6	3
Participation in activities	8	20	16	12	44	3.6	3
Historical-archaeological reports	8	32	28	12	20	3.0	3
Details of meals offered							
Authenticity	0	0	0	8	92	4.9	4
Quality	0	0	0	20	80	4.8	4
Taste	0	0	4	32	64	4.6	4

Good service	0	0	8	44	48	4.4	4
Security	0	0	28	36	36	4.0	4
Variety	0	0	24	44	32	4.0	4
Appearance	0	4	16	64	16	3.9	3
Sufficient quantity	0	12	48	28	12	3.4	
Price	4	12	52	24	8	3.2	
Memory conservation							
Socializing with locals	4	0	4	8	76	4.6	
Pleasant Company	0	0	8	28	64	4.6	
Hospitable atmosphere	0	0	8	40	52	4.4	
Participation in the food preparation/food production	4	12	16	16	52	4.0	
Traditional entertainment	4	12	28	36	20	3.6	
Food Souvenirs	4	28	36	28	4	3.0	

5.2. Characteristics of Food Tours

The characteristics of the food tours that take place in Greece are presented in Table 2. Specifically, the days when the food tours take place vary depending on the demand of the tourists and are made by appointment (60.0%) or daily (36.0%) while rarely some days of the week (8.0%) or some specific days. Businesses have the opportunity to organize food tours all year round, any season with the same frequency in spring, summer, and autumn (20.0%) where the weather is favorable, and are limited to winter (4.0%). The duration of a food tour varies depending on the activities, the schedule, the form, and all the factors that contribute to its creation. Most businesses offer tours lasting more than 3 hours (56.0%), many last 2 - 3 hours (36.0%) while a few are 1 - 2 hours (4.0%) or a full day (4.0%).

The way the tours are implemented is mostly on foot (60%), many with a private bus (25%) to cover longer distances, by bike (10%), while a few are done with luxury cars (5%). Tours as activities include visits to local restaurants and taverns (25%), shops selling local products (20%), flea markets (15%), cafes-bars (10%), and wineries (10%). Furthermore, a significant number of tours end up with local producers and festivals of local products (5.0%), and sometimes in a cooking workshop (7.0%). Finally, in smaller percentages, the visit to olive mills takes place (3.0%). Also, the predominant languages used in the tours are Greek and English. The tools for promoting the tours are social media (60.0%), tourist promotion websites and foreign travel agencies (15.0%), and magazines and newspapers (10.0%).

5.3. Main Factors in Designing a Gastronomic Experience As shown in Table 3 entrepreneurs pay attention to the health issues (Mean = 3.6) that tourists who follow food tours may have and also consider religious beliefs (Mean = 3.4), while not focusing on the Dietary Preferences (Mean = 2.6) of the visitors.

The most important service that must accompany the food tour seems to be the connection with the locals (Mean = 4.7), the promotion of the local culture (Mean = 4.2), and the acquaintance with the owners or the chefs of the companies (Mean = 4.1) are visited. Authenticity (Mean = 4.9), quality (Mean = 4.8), and taste (Mean = 4.6) are the dominant elements in creating a culinary experience while price (Mean = 3.2) seems to be insignificant.

Finally, the creation of a gastronomic experience is achieved through the preservation of the memory of this experience which takes place through contact with the locals (Mean = 4.6) and pleasant company (Mean = 4.6) and not so much by the provision of a souvenir (Mean = 3.0).

6. Conclusion

Food tours are an excellent tool for exploring the society and culture of a place by creating close relationships between food, people, and place (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). The food tours are organized for different purposes and are addressed to different groups of visitors using the food as a “window” for different cultures. Thus, food and drink add value to tourists as it connects them to other worlds, leads them to new lifestyles, and creates opportunities to find, examine and try their limits in the unknown (Boniface, 2003; Long, 1998). In other words, gastronomic experiences connect the place with the food of a destination, through a cultural atmosphere that is essential for an unforgettable travel experience (Hjalager & Richards, 2002).

The analysis of the research results shows that food tour companies in Greece are newly established, i.e. companies that were created in the last fifteen years, with particular growth in the last five years. These are small businesses that employ 1 - 3 people and employ as tour guides or graduates of tourism schools that are either locals or not. These guides, however, have not received any relevant training on what a tour should

include and how to do it. Food business tours serve up to 500 tourists a year coming mainly from America and various European countries.

The profile of the food tour companies easily shows that they are an emerging business activity of gastronomic tourism in Greece but it has significant weaknesses. Firstly, the guides of the tours are not locals and at the same time, they do not have specialized training in terms of what it is, but also how the gastronomic profile of the place should be displayed. This is likely to create a deficit in maximizing the satisfaction of the tourists taking them, as the guide is considered to act as a gastronomy mediator (Ko, 2015) and the participating tourists expect to gather all the information regarding the local food. It is important for food tour businesses that their guides are well acquainted with the local products and local gastronomy as well as what they offer (not just to know routes and businesses), to offer the most authentic gastronomic experience (Chang et al., 2011). Service is deeply embedded in gastronomic tourism and, as Henderson (2009) states, “the tourism industry must have the power to deliver on its marketing promises to avoid frustrated customers and harmful advertising.” To achieve this goal, gastronomic companies must invest in appropriate technologies and continuous education and training, so that their workforce is capable and enthusiastic to provide quality services with confidence. Therefore, on the one hand, the employment of locals will create added value in the tours as it utilizes and at the same time strengthens the local resources while on the other hand, the specialized training will enhance the services of the food tours beyond the display of the local elements to be highlighted (products, businesses, stories, etc.) thus ensuring the authentic gastronomic experience of the place to tourists and maximizing their satisfaction.

Regarding the characteristics of the tours offered by these Greek companies, they seem to focus on the availability of tours by appointment on weekdays, mainly in spring, summer, and autumn. The good weather that prevails in Greece at these times seems to favor the implementation of tours that take more than 3 hours on foot, with predominant visits to restaurants, shops selling local products, and popular markets. The language used during the guided food tour is Greek or English and their promotion is done primarily by social media.

Food tour businesses in Greece can act as tourist links to restaurants and grocery stores to show off their gourmet profile, however, upon completion of the tour, visitors gain an overall picture of the profile of the place’s gastronomy and become “locals” for a day. It seems that restaurants are especially important in tours as they not only integrate visitors into the consumption of local products and dishes but also educate them on the quality that accompanies the food (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). Visitors find it worthwhile to try a variety of local foods and drinks, as they also learn where these foods come from and perhaps even how they are made. This educational and social experience in cultural objects, such as food with other like-minded people, tends to increase intimacy in the relationship between these individuals (Lupton, 1996).

The results of this research also show that gastronomic entrepreneurs recognize the importance of health issues and religious beliefs as factors to consider when planning a tour. This is of paramount importance as it shows on the one hand respect for the particularities and the culture of the tourists who take the tour and on the other hand creates a positive gastronomic experience without dissatisfaction. At the same time, the contact with the locals, the integration with the local culture, and the contact with the owner/chef of the visiting business during the tour maximize the gastronomic experience of the visitors. This contact with the people and the habits of the place gives the tourists the feeling of living as “locals” for one day. Moreover, as Reisinger & Turner (1998) claim, the heart of the tourist experience lies in the interaction between visitors

and locals. In addition, it is particularly important, as the results show that there is authenticity, quality, and taste in the meals they try during the tour, as for many tourists the motivation to participate in such activities is the desire to “taste” the “true” life (MacCannell, 1973) through the daily diet of the locals. Finally, the entrepreneurs of food tours emphasize that the memory of the gastronomic experience is maintained mainly through connection with the locals and the creation of a pleasant atmosphere. It is a fact that contact with the locals is the strongest element of tourist memory (Morgan & Xu, 2009) since through social interactions (Selstad, 2007) the gap between locals and tourists is eliminated (Auld & Case, 1997) maximizing the experience of the latter. Even the pleasant atmosphere that accompanies the tourists’ meal is an important factor in the tourist experience and memory as it allows them to escape from their daily routine and the stressful environments that may exist in their daily lives (Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987).

In summary, this research attempted to capture the identity of food tours in Greece through the profile of the companies that offer them, the characteristics that the tours themselves have along with the main factors that must be considered when planning a tour for creating a gastronomic experience for customers. The results contribute to the scientific community that deals with entrepreneurship, highlighting the importance and potential of this branch of gastronomic tourism, and also to the ones that study gastronomic tourism through the relationship between food products, residents, and place.

The results also contribute on a practical level as they can be used as a guide by the food tour companies to form a list of the important factors that must be included in their tours to invest in them as a priority. Thus, they can invest in the right direction to on the one hand save the available resources, on the other hand, maximize the satisfaction of their customers. Moreover, businesses that take part in food tours, such as restaurants, can create more traditional menus with local ingredients and encourage a more personalized service to tourists by describing the origins of the ingredients, the history that can accompany a dish, and also the habits with which it is associated. Respectively, other companies involved in the tour can develop actions to integrate the visitors in the preparation of a product or meal and the interaction with locals to maximize their gastronomic experience and memory. The results are especially important also for the marketing organizations that try to promote a place and can highlight tours and businesses that meet the important factors that enable tourists to have an authentic local gastronomic experience.

Concluding, as the research on gastronomic tourism and in particular food tours is increasing, it requires focused research on prospects of cooperation between the companies providing gastronomic services and the strategy of the involved bodies. This will result in the development of specialized training programs for guides who lead the food tours to possess comprehensive knowledge of promoting local gastronomy and specialized skills on how to integrate tourists into it. The aim of this cooperation can be not only to attract tourists to different parts of the country but also to the repeatability of their visits.

Although the study enhances our knowledge of food tour companies and the main factors in designing a culinary-gastronomic experience, it has certain limitations when it comes to the issue of generalization. The findings of the research can’t be extended to all food tour companies all over the world, as there are differences in their profile and characteristics in every destination or country. Maybe studying a larger sample of food tour businesses, i.e. in all European countries would increase the generalizability of the findings. Finally, future research in the exploration of the main factors of gastronomic experience on walks from the tourists’ point of view will give a more complete picture of the topic under consideration.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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