

Rural tourism as a response to special nutritional needs

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ABSTRACT

As part of the GASTROTOP project, a survey was conducted on attitudes towards intolerance or allergy to food and drink, and their consumption in catering facilities. Emphasis is placed on food and drink for special nutritional needs. Research results show that more than 30% of people that responded have a problem with food or drink. Since the trend of healthy eating prevails today, a professional approach is very important when planning and shaping the offer in catering. Panel discussion participants believe that the new food trends will be the easiest to adapt to family farms that deal with rural tourism and themselves produce most of the food they offer to its guests. Therefore, rural tourism should increasingly strive for multidisciplinary approach that will combine tourism, catering, agriculture, and nutrition, so in that sense it is necessary to design future education.

Key words: rural tourism, special nutritional needs, food sensitivity, catering offer

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the most important industries, and there is a growing interest in gastro tourism. Gastrotourists want to taste local food, and learn about unique flavors and ingredients through food festivals, wine trails, spice markets, and the like. In Croatia today, rural tourism is the most common supplementary activity of family farms, where visitors are also given the opportunity to taste and explore local gastronomic products. However, in the last few years, people have

been increasingly talking about their problems when consuming certain foods due to their hectic lifestyle and stress. To protect themselves, they are increasingly choosing what and where to eat, who will prepare food for them, and guarantee that they are eating healthy foods. They strive for a healthy lifestyle and healthy food, that is, health comes first. Therefore, there is a tendency for catering establishments to participate in a healthy way of preparing food and order good quality food from local farms.

The GASTROTOP project¹ starts from the fact that today's living conditions have changed the structure of consumption and demand for food, so one of the project's goals is to adapt food supply to specific segments of consumption with dietary restrictions. The paper aims to prove that rural tourism economies will most easily adapt to the specific demand for food for special nutritional needs in emerging consumer markets.

Gastronomy is generally a science of nutrition, closely linked to gastro tourism which implies an unforgettable experience of food and drink in a local place. Gastro tourism is defined as the search for authentic, unforgettable food or drink experiences while traveling (Hjalager and Corigliano 2000). Gastro tourism involves visiting food producers, gastronomic events, restaurants, and special places where one can taste traditional food, observe the process of production and preparation, or eat a special meal (Hall et al. 2003). Findings from recent research reveal that gastro tourists are eager to travel to a destination and spend the night if there are a minimum of six interesting gastronomic experiences (Williams et al. 2018).

Rural areas are most often promoted to tourists through their specific food, and local food production sites such as farms, dairy farms, cheese dairies, wineries, and breweries are further promoted as tourist attractions, generating additional income (Woods 2020). Therefore, gastronomy and regional food are becoming an important factor in the tourist offer in Croatia, especially in rural tourism.

On the other hand, there are tourists whose motivation for coming to a destination is frequently gastronomy, but consumer trends

are changing due to increasing intolerance or allergies to certain foods. Nowadays, the accelerated way of life has led people to often resort to the so-called fast food and poor nutrition, which has led to the emergence of various chronic diseases. More and more people have an allergy, especially in the developed part of the world, where one in three people has some type of allergy (Kažinić 2009), with food allergy having an upward trend. Therefore, a healthy diet is becoming a global trend, and consumers have high expectations of food. They do not expect food to satisfy only the feeling of hunger and provide the necessary nutrients, but today's consumers expect food to prevent or alleviate diet-related diseases and to improve health and quality of life (Krešić 2012). There is a noticeable increase in awareness of the impact of food on health, personalized nutrition, protection of food authenticity, consumption of organically grown food, and the organization of the tourist value chain in general in accordance with the principles of sustainable development (Bakan 2015). There is a growing interest in restaurants in rural areas, but tourists' preferences for food characteristics are also expressed, especially those such as composition, nutritional value, calories, decoration, healthy food, and taste (Ružić 2009).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

As part of the GASTROTOP project, a Google survey was carried out on 439 respondents from the counties of Koprivnica-Križevci and Virovitica-Podravina on attitudes towards food and drink intolerance/allergy, and its consumption in restaurants. Respondents were randomly selected, and the basic criteria were the age of respondents (at least 18 years old), and place of residence from the surveyed counties. The survey was conducted in the

¹ Hungary-Croatia Cross-Border Cooperation Program 2014-2020

period from October 2021 to January 2022, and the questions in the survey were of open and closed type.

The research results were used for the panel discussion “(IN) tolerance to food in catering establishments,” where the intended suggestion was the INnovation in rural-tourist facilities with regard to tolerance for special nutritional needs. The panel discussion was conducted with representatives of consumers with special nutritional needs (representative of diabetics and representatives of people with celiac disease), an owner of a farm engaged in rural tourism², a nutritionist, and a cooking professor. The analysis of the results of the Google survey and the analysis of the panel discussion aims to answer whether farms engaged in rural tourism can best adapt to today’s demands of healthy consumers for healthy eating, emphasizing people with special nutritional needs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results sent to 439 randomly selected respondents showed that as many as 21.9% have some food-related problem. Most respondents reported having lactose intolerance, histamine sensitivity, nut allergy, diabetes, milk protein allergy, and coeliac disease. If we add to these results the results related to ingredients that respondents may avoid in beverages, then it turns out that more than one-third of randomly selected respondents have a problem related to food or drink (37.4%).

Representatives of consumers with special nutritional needs highlighted the problems of their members during the panel discussion. The representative of coeliacs pointed out that

2 Owner of a rural-tourist farm – a term that will be used in research results for easier interpretation.

“in order to reduce stigma and increase the quality of life of people with the disease or people who are on a gluten-free diet, it is important to educate the public.” The representative of diabetics pointed out that there are between 8-10% of people with diabetes, according to statistics. However, the most devastating thing is that many people do not even know they have diabetes, so they “accidentally” learn through the activities of their association during the free measurement of blood glucose levels in city centers. He pointed out that *people with diabetes should eat healthy foods, which should be slightly modified, but not too much. However, healthy food is not only the wish of diabetics, but the wish of all of us to eat healthily.* The nutritionist pointed out *similar research on the respondents’ self-assessment of the existence of some food intolerance/allergy which showed that about 17% of respondents have some form of intolerance/allergy (which may be joined by another 10% of those with diabetes), which shows that the numbers are increasing and that more and more special nutritional needs will need to be taken into account in catering establishments.* The increase in the number of people with special nutritional needs can be confirmed by the next survey results where more than half of the respondents could immediately think of a close person (close or distant family member, friend/acquaintance) with an intolerance/allergy to food or drink (53%), and only 24% immediately confirmed that they did not know anyone in “that category”.

The nutritionist points out that for now, consumers have the most confidence in the products of the food industry, which have an obligation to declare allergens and thus get all the information about food products. She also points out that it is imperative to cooperate with associations whose members have some

nutritional needs to get information on what should be taken into account and apply it in business, mainly thinking about the food industry. She points out that a gluten-free diet has become a trend in recent years because about 40% of the population wants to eat gluten-free food, not because they have any gluten health problems, but because it has become a trend.

A further result of the research showed that respondents consume food in catering establishments 32 days a year on average. The cooking professor pointed out that we are at the bottom in relation to the EU tourist countries, especially when it comes to family restaurant visits. He further emphasizes that the primary motive for going to a restaurant is a healthy way of preparation and quality and tasty food (90%). The next is the financial aspect and then the location of the establishment. Guests are looking for superior food, groceries grown on family farms, or they want to know where the product comes from, who the producer is, what it was fed with, how it comes to market, how caterers store these goods, how food is prepared and the like. Restaurants are increasingly trying to prepare meals with food that comes from local family farms, especially if it is food that is from organic farming. The cooking professor also pointed out that the trend of a healthy diet has been growing over the last ten years and that we do not have to be sick to eat healthy and to consume quality foods that are grown in a natural way.

The representative of the rural-tourist economy emphasizes that the pace of living is hectic, so people really appreciate quality food produced on farms, and also want to socialize in nature, in the open, in open spaces that family farms can provide. She emphasizes that agriculture is the primary activity of family farms, and rural tourism is a complementary

activity. It is very important for you to emphasize to guests that you treat the soil and plants in an ecological way and they like to consume vegetables from the garden or fruits from the tree directly.

The following research results show that most respondents (90%) did not have problems related to intolerance/allergies to food and drink when visiting restaurants, but 10% point out the following:

- There was no menu with food for special nutritional needs
- Although an allergy was noted, the cream was put into the meal, and I had severe digestion problems.
- Apart from salad, dairy-free dishes are rare
- Subsequent removal of a harmful ingredient
- *The person who put the food on my plate was not careful to use a separate handle or utensil intended for that dish. A handle used for fish was used, and I got an allergic reaction.*
- *The waiter couldn't answer if there was any cream in the sauce. The second time with the claim that there was no cream, the cream could be tasted after the food was served. Unfortunately, some workers in catering do not understand the seriousness of the issue and see you as a fussy patron.*

The participants in the panel discussion first discussed the last comment and whether people with special nutritional needs are "fussy". The representative of the patients with coeliac disease pointed out that they warn their members about responsible behavior when

they ask for a gluten-free meal in a restaurant. A person with coeliac disease cannot say, after a strict requirement for a gluten-free meal, “*well, it won't hurt me if I eat one tiramisu*” at the end of a meal when they see delicious desserts. There are members who have an immediate reaction to gluten and on the other hand, those who may be able to eat something for years and have no problems, but then the problem will happen as a much worse case. Therefore, people with special nutritional needs and staff in catering establishments should be educated. It is believed that family farms active in rural tourism are a solution for preparing safe gluten-free meals from organically grown foods, without the use of pesticides and herbicides, which are the most significant cause of intolerance. A representative of diabetics said that diabetics are not so “demanding guests” because even if they eat a meal richer in refined carbohydrates, it will not lead to an immediate reaction. However, he pointed out that most catering establishments do not specify how much carbohydrates are in the meal, which is very important for children and young people with type 1 diabetes, i.e., who inject insulin. The owner of the rural-tourist facility pointed out that they respect their guests, their requests, and wishes, which they agree on orally in advance and do not offer “a la carte service”³. Since they work in agriculture during the week, they mainly serve the food they produce on weekends by prior arrangement. *If we worked in catering every day, it would be very difficult to achieve the quality of food we have now by working in this way.* The golden rule of “*what our families eat, our guests eat*” is also respected - so everything must be of the highest quality. As the economy develops, we no longer get to

sit and eat with our guests, but we make sure to talk to them about everything that interests them, and most of all, about the food they consume in our establishment. However, she points out that if a patron has, for example, a severe case of coeliac disease and nothing should be contaminated with gluten, they say that they cannot fulfill this. This is very rare and then they usually bring their own food, if it is a group of guests. A la carte restaurants are at a disadvantage in such cases because they must immediately create a dish for people with intolerance or allergy to certain foods. The cooking professor was interested in a comment related to the contamination of cutlery, which will be difficult to solve due to the technical conditions of the kitchen, uneducated staff, small investments by owners in educating workers, and the size of the space where chefs work. He says chefs often work in tiny spaces and must create excellent meals. Contamination in the kitchen often occurs when a meal must be prepared quickly, especially in a la carte restaurants, and guests are quite impatient due to the aforementioned rush and know that a la carte dish must be served within 20 minutes. He points out that someone who has not graduated from catering school cannot work in the kitchen, while anyone can be a waiter, so he points out lack of education as one of the key problems. He points out that a waiter's job is both dangerous and difficult if food is served that they know nothing about or cannot explain to the guest.

On the other hand, there is too little investment in the education of chefs and waiters. However, from his own experience, he says that he worked in restaurants where the owners invested in staff training, sent them abroad to be educated to become top chefs, run the business in the right way, meet the needs

3 Meals are ordered separately, i.e., guests choose and compose their own meals from the offer when they come to the restaurant.

of each guest, and not only some. For now, the high school program for waiters and chefs has very few subjects that fall under the program of special nutritional needs, so teachers include that part through individual subjects “at their own discretion”⁴.

Table 1 shows that respondents do not feel uncomfortable when they must inquire about allergens in a restaurant, but they think that restaurants should label allergens more appropriately on their menus. They also do not believe in the knowledge and expertise of restaurant service staff when inquiring about allergens.

Therefore, they disagree with the statement that people with special nutritional needs can safely consume food and beverages in restaurants and those restaurants are increasingly emphasizing the proper serving of people with special nutritional needs. The respondents agree that “free-from”⁵ products are easier to obtain at county centers and that, whenever they can, they will consume food and drink they prepared by themselves.

Table 1. An average grade of respondents’ agreement with claims about food consumption in catering establishments

Claim	Average grade*
I feel uncomfortable when I must inquire about allergens in a restaurant.	1.8
Restaurants appropriately label allergens on their menus.	1.9
Nowadays, people with special nutritional needs can safely consume food and drink in catering facilities.	2.1
I trust the knowledge and expertise of restaurant service staff when inquiring about allergens.	2.2
Restaurants are placing increasing emphasis on the proper serving of people with special nutritional needs.	2.3
“Free from” products are more readily available in the county centers than in other places in the county.	2.6
Whenever I can, I consume the food and drink I prepared.	3.6

* 1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: agree, 4: strongly agree

Source: Google survey

The panelists commented that restaurants on their menus (inappropriately) label allergens and that respondents consume their own food and drinks whenever they can. The nutritionist pointed out that the food industries are legally obligated to declare ingredients in the food that are potential allergens and additives, so consumers know exactly what that product contains. This is the Consumer Information

on Food Act (56/2013), which she thinks is not adequately implemented in restaurants, given that information on allergens or flavor enhancers in food is not on the menus. Namely, each guest has the right to ask the caterer to provide them at their request with information about the presence of allergens or flavor enhancers in food. However, according to this research, he points out that it is inevitable to

4 In the overall program, this would amount to 13-14%.

5 „Free from“ food is gluten-free, lactose-free, or grain-free food

point out such data in the menus if you want to attract 30% of people who have some special nutritional needs and who say they do not trust the restaurant because they do not know what to eat. If restaurants do not offer them an adequate diet and all the information, they will not come to the restaurants. The representative of the rural-tourist economy points out that at the guest's request, she will provide a list of allergens in certain foods that are served to guests.

The respondents agreed with all the above statements related to restaurants informing about allergens and "free-from" food. The cooking professor agreed that restaurants should have information about what a certain meal contains and that this is easily done in electronic form, making it easier to update the menu. Otherwise, the menus should be changed daily, which would shorten the time spent in the kitchen by the chef at the expense of paperwork, which is unacceptable, according to the cooking professor. He emphasizes that the information must be accessible and clear, and that all the kitchen workers should be familiar with the method of preparation, how to approach a guest with a particular problem, how to offer or not offer food to the guest. The future lies in new methods through reading QR codes on menus and using digital menus. Information about the offer of food in restaurants should be highlighted via the internet, and special attention should be paid to social networks because 99% of people are on a social network where people like to read the comments of others who have consumed food in restaurants.

The representative of coeliacs once again talked about the rules in the kitchen, where special utensils and dishes are needed for special nutritional needs, which is very

complicated considering small kitchen spaces. She pointed out the current cooperation of its members with family farms and suggested that it would be easiest to turn family farms engaged in rural tourism into a completely gluten-free establishment. She claims that 95% of the food in these establishments is organic, gluten-free, such as fruits and vegetables, eggs, and milk. She says that we have foods from the "God-given" environment that are nutritionally extremely valuable, healthy, and as such, suitable for a safe gluten-free diet. However, a small percentage of flour, for example, can contaminate the entire diet, and in fact, such family farms should adapt with only 5% of ingredients. She mentioned a restaurant that offers completely gluten-free meals so that the staff could get acquainted with all the ingredients and rules of a gluten-free diet, the training lasted 3 months, and the restaurant works great. However, she points out that if a family farm opts for the above, it needs promotion at the beginning, and is sure that most citizens would be oriented towards that offer.

CONCLUSION

A random selection of respondents showed that more than 1/3 of respondents stated that they had some problem with consuming food or drink. The panel discussion found that this number is growing, and that public education is needed to increase the quality of life of people with special nutritional needs, who are often stigmatized because of it. But, on the other hand, they suggest educating the public because some people learn that they have diabetes, for example, at free measuring of blood glucose levels.

People who have a problem with eating or drinking often feel like "fussy guests" in

restaurants and are not sure if special utensils are used to prepare their meals. Contamination of cutlery used by chefs in catering establishments occurs due to the technical conditions of the kitchen, uneducated staff, small investments by the owners in the education of workers, and the size of the space in which the chefs work. To avoid such situations, the panel discussion concluded that staff in catering establishments should be educated, as should people with special nutritional needs.

Most respondents agree with the statement that restaurants inappropriately label allergens on their menus and that they consume their own food and drinks whenever they can. The panel discussion determined that menus should highlight allergens and food additives if restaurants want to attract people with special nutritional needs. The solution lies in reading QR codes on menus, using digital menus, and publishing information about the offer of food through social networks on the internet.

Respondents consume food in catering establishments on average 32 days a year. The panel discussion pointed out that in terms of family visits to restaurants, Croatia is at the back compared to EU countries, but that the primary motive for going to a restaurant is a healthy way of preparing food. Guests are looking for top-quality food or groceries grown on family farms, they want to know where the product comes from, who the producer is, and the like. Therefore, restaurants are increasingly trying to prepare meals with food from local family farms, emphasizing organic farming. In addition to appreciating quality food, people want to socialize in nature, in the open, want to consume vegetables directly from the garden or fruit from the tree, and all this is provided by family farms that are engaged in rural tourism or rural tourism farms. Members of that farm

work in agriculture during the week. On weekends, mostly, by the prior announcement, they serve the food they produce. They also apply the rule “what our families eat, our guests eat too”, and if they don’t get to sit down and eat with their guests, they make sure to talk to guests about anything that interests them.

Therefore, the main conclusion of the panel discussion is that through rural tourism, family farms could most quickly adapt to the specific demand for emerging consumer markets for food for special nutritional needs.

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Seoski turizam kao odgovor na posebne prehrambene potrebe

SAŽETAK

U sklopu projekta GASTROTOP provedeno je anketno istraživanje o stavovima spram intolerancije ili alergije na hranu i piće te njezinu konzumaciju u ugostiteljskim objektima. Naglasak je stavljen na hranu i piće za posebne prehrambene potrebe. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da više od 30% ispitanika ima problem vezan uz hranu ili piće. S obzirom da danas prevladava trend zdrave prehrane, vrlo je važan stručan pristup prilikom planiranja i oblikovanja ponude u ugostiteljstvu. Sudionici panel rasprave smatraju kako će se novim trendovima u prehrani najlakše prilagoditi obiteljska poljoprivredna gospodarstva koja se bave seoskim turizmom i sama proizvode većinu hrane koja nude svojim gostima. Stoga, seoski turizam sve više treba težiti multidisciplinarnom pristupu u kojem će se spojiti turizam, ugostiteljstvo, poljoprivreda i nutricionizam pa je u tom smislu potrebno osmisliti buduće edukacije.

Ključne riječi: seoski turizam, posebne prehrambene potrebe, osjetljivost na hranu, ponuda u ugostiteljstvu