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KNOWLEDGE AND USE OF CROATIAN INDIGENOUS AND LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTS IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY IN THE AREAS OF OSIJEK AND ĐAKOVO

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Summary

Indigenous and local food products represent an important part of gastronomic heritage and can contribute to the distinctiveness of local and regional hospitality offerings. The aim of this study was to assess the level of knowledge of Croatian indigenous and local food products among hospitality workers in the areas of Osijek and Đakovo, determine their understanding of the distinction between indigenous and local products, analyze their use in hospitality offerings, and examine hospitality workers' attitudes towards the importance of indigenous products for the operations of hospitality establishments and guests' choice of dishes. The study was conducted on a convenience sample of ten hospitality establishments, five located in the Đakovo area and five in the Osijek area. One employee was surveyed in each establishment, most commonly a kitchen manager or service manager. Data were collected using an 11-item questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive analysis and thematic grouping of responses. The results show that all respondents identified at least one indigenous or traditional Croatian food product, while six respondents identified a label or mark associated with product quality and origin. All respondents reported using at least one indigenous or traditional product in their hospitality offerings, while nine respondents reported using local products. Baranja kulen was used by eight out of ten establishments, while Baranja cheese was used by three establishments. All respondents considered indigenous products to be of some importance for the operations of hospitality establishments, although some responses were conditional on product recognition and guest characteristics. Respondents also generally indicated that informing guests about the use of local and indigenous products may influence their choice of dishes. The results indicate the presence of indigenous and local products in the local hospitality offering, but also point to the need for a clearer distinction between the concepts of indigenous and local products and for better knowledge of quality and origin labeling schemes.

Keywords: indigenous products, local products, hospitality industry, gastronomic offering

Introduction

Food products associated with a particular area represent an important part of cultural and gastronomic heritage. The development of traditional dietary practices in Croatia has been influenced by natural and climatic conditions, the availability of local raw materials, as well as historical, economic, and cultural circumstances, resulting in differences in food traditions among Croatian regions (Briški and Jarec, 2014). Traditional food products are not merely components of the diet but are also associated with the identity of local and regional communities and represent part of intangible cultural heritage (Čačić Kenjerić and Sokolić, 2021).

The concept of traditional food encompasses several interconnected characteristics. Guerrero et al. (2009) state that consumers associate traditional products with their origin and local character, methods of production and processing, sensory properties, and links to dietary habits and traditions. Due to these characteristics, traditional and local products can play an important role in shaping a distinctive gastronomic offering.

Gastronomy is also an important component of the tourist experience of a destination. Fox (2007) discusses the role of gastronomic heritage in shaping the gastronomic identity of Croatian tourist destinations and emphasizes the importance of gastronomy in Croatia's tourism offering. Local food can be associated with destination attractiveness and visitor experience, particularly when its origin and connection with the local area are clearly communicated (Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016).

However, the traditional character of a product does not necessarily imply a favorable nutritional or health profile. The nutritional composition of traditional products can vary considerably, particularly in the case of traditional meat products, whose protein, fat, salt, and fatty acid contents depend on the type of product and production methods. At the same time, certain products may present potential food safety risks associated with production methods, such as nitrates and nitrites, biogenic amines, or certain contaminants

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(Briški and Jarec, 2014; Čačić Kenjerić and Sokolić, 2021; Halagarda and Wójciak, 2022). Therefore, when considering indigenous and traditional products, it is necessary to take into account their nutritional value, raw material composition and production methods, food safety, as well as the amount and frequency of consumption and their role within the overall dietary pattern (Halagarda and Wójciak, 2022; Dinu et al., 2018; Tripoli et al., 2005). Particular attention has been given to the Mediterranean diet, in which olive oil and plant-based foods play an important role, while the association between this dietary pattern and various health outcomes has been examined in numerous studies (Dinu et al., 2018). The biological potential of polyphenolic compounds present in olive oil and other plant foods has also been the subject of extensive research (Gorzynik-Debicka et al., 2018; Tripoli et al., 2005).

Due to their association with local raw materials, traditions, and preparation methods, indigenous products have considerable potential for use in the hospitality industry. Hospitality establishments represent an important setting for direct consumer interaction with local and traditional food products. Their inclusion in menus enables the presentation of local gastronomic heritage while potentially increasing the visibility of products and producers and contributing to the creation of a more authentic gastronomic experience. Research indicates that local food can be an important factor in destination attractiveness and an integral part of the visitor experience, particularly when it is associated with local identity and the characteristics of the area (Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016). Therefore, when presenting traditional products, their cultural, gastronomic, and regional value should be distinguished from nutritional and health claims.

In the hospitality industry, employees' knowledge of local and traditional products may be important for their appropriate presentation to guests. Previous studies conducted among hospitality employees and management indicate an association between traditional products and characteristics of hospitality offerings, as well as various factors that may influence their use and consumption (Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2023a; Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2023b). A similar relationship between local food and tourism offerings was highlighted in a recent study by Tošić et al. (2026), which examined hospitality employees' perceptions of the role of local food in tourism development.

Food choices may be influenced by various personal and situational factors; therefore, guests' attitudes towards local and traditional products cannot be reduced to a single factor. Local food may play an important role in the tourist experience and destination attractiveness (Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016). In Croatia, some traditional and regionally recognized products are included in the European Union quality-label protection system. One example is Baranja kulen, whose name was entered in the register of Protected Geographical Indications (PGI) by Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2015/1579 of 9 September 2015.

It is important to distinguish between the terms "indigenous" and "local". In everyday language, these terms are often used interchangeably, although they do not necessarily refer to the same concept. A local product may be produced in Croatia or by a domestic producer, whereas the concept of indigeneity is generally associated with a product that is characteristic and recognizable in relation to a particular area, tradition, and production method. In this study, these terms were analyzed primarily in terms of the understanding and use of the concepts by hospitality employees themselves, rather than through the formal legal classification of each individual product mentioned.

Considering the above, the aim of this study was to assess the level of knowledge of Croatian indigenous and local food products among hospitality employees in the areas of Osijek and Đakovo, determine their understanding of the distinction between indigenous and local products, analyze their use in hospitality offerings, and examine hospitality employees' attitudes towards the importance of indigenous products for the operations of hospitality establishments and guests' choice of dishes.

Materials and methods

Sample and Study Procedure

The study was conducted in the areas of Osijek and Đakovo, Croatia. A total of ten hospitality establishments were included in the study, five located in the Đakovo area and five in the Osijek area. One employee was surveyed in each establishment, generally a person involved in the organization of kitchen or service operations, such as a kitchen manager or service manager. The hospitality establishments were not identified by name but were designated by numbers from 1 to 10. Establishments 1–5 were located in the Đakovo area, whereas establishments 6–10 were located in the Osijek area.

Data were collected using a questionnaire consisting of 11 questions (Table 1). The questionnaire was developed specifically for this study in accordance with its objectives. The questions addressed knowledge of indigenous and local food products,

awareness of quality labels, understanding of the concepts of “indigenous” and “local”, the use of indigenous and local products in hospitality offerings, and the perceived importance of these products for business operations and guests’ food choices.
The questionnaire was pre-tested on five employees working in the student catering system. The hospitality establishments participating in the study were approached through in-person visits, and participation in the study was voluntary. One employee from each establishment was invited to participate in the survey. The questionnaire was provided in written form and completed independently by each respondent.

Table 1. Questions included in the questionnaire

No.	Question
1.	Please name some Croatian indigenous products.
2.	Are you familiar with the quality labels used for Croatian indigenous products? If so, please list them.
3.	Which words or expressions would you use as synonyms for the term "indigenous"?
4.	Which words or expressions would you use as synonyms for the term "local"?
5.	Do you use indigenous products in your hospitality offering? If so, which ones?
6.	Do you use local products in your hospitality offering? If so, which ones?
7.	In your opinion, what is the difference between indigenous and local products?
8.	Do you use Baranja cheese in your hospitality offering?
9.	Do you use Baranja kulen in your hospitality offering?
10.	Do you consider that the use of indigenous products contributes to better business performance of a hospitality establishment?
11.	If guests are aware that indigenous or local products are used in the preparation of a dish, do you think they would be more likely to choose such a dish rather than another dish?

Results and discussion

The results of the study conducted in five hospitality establishments in Osijek and five hospitality establishments in Đakovo are presented in Tables 2 and 3. In analyzing the responses concerning quality labels, particular attention was paid to the fact that respondents did not always provide formal protected designation labels. Therefore, responses such as "100% Croatian" and "Produced in Croatia" were recorded as signs or labels that respondents associated with product quality or origin but were not automatically interpreted as evidence of knowledge of the PDO/PGI system.

Table 2. Overview of responses from the surveyed hospitality establishments in the Đakovo area

Hospitality establishments	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Knowledge of indigenous products	Rimac	Pag cheese	Pag cheese, Istrian prosciutto, kulen	Cured meat products – bacon, kulen, ham, pork cracklings	Kulen, Pag salt, Pag cheese
Knowledge of quality labels	100% Croatian	Do not know	PDO	Do not know	Produced in Croatia, PDO
Understanding of the term "indigenous"	Local	Local	Original	Local	Original, local
Understanding of the term "local"	Traditional	Organic	Natural	Indigenous	Home production, natural, GMO-free
Use of indigenous products	Karlovačko	Prosciutto, kulen	Kulen	Slavonian kulen	Kulen
Use of local products	Brandy, OPG Arambašić	Smoked cheese, OPG	OPG – wine, beer, hemp flour, prosciutto	OPG – bacon, ham, pork cracklings, local cheese	Not used
Distinction between indigenous and local products	No difference	Do not know	Quality	Production method, recognizability	Local does not necessarily mean indigenous (more

					broadly recognizable)
Use of Baranja cheese	No	No	No	No	No
Use of Baranja kulen	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Opinion on the impact of indigenous products	Yes	Yes	Yes	It should be, but unfortunately it is not so	Yes, it matters to some people
Impact of informing guests	They order indigenous and local products more often	Yes	They prefer to order local and indigenous products	Depends on the individual and their purchasing power	Some will choose local products over industrial products

Table 3. Overview of responses from the surveyed hospitality establishments in the Osijek area

Hospitality establishments	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
Knowledge of indigenous products	Kulen, pork cracklings, prosciutto, truffles	Prosciutto, olive oil, various cheeses, lamb	Local cured meat products, Baranja pepper, meat from Black Slavonian pig, Pag cheese	Kulen, brandy, blood sausage	Baranja kulen, Istrian prosciutto, pork cracklings, olive oil
Knowledge of quality labels	PDO	Do not know	PDO	Do not know	PDO, PGI
Understanding of the term "indigenous"	Local, from our area	Original, authentic	Unique, rare, verified, high-quality	Local	Original, traditional, natural, long-lasting
Understanding of the term "local"	Ours	Local	Good, tasty, high-quality, difficult to find in stores	Only ours, from our area	Ours, fresh, natural
Use of indigenous products	Baranja kulen	Yes, prosciutto, olive oil, kulen	Yes, Baranja kulen	Yes, kulen, mlinci, brandy, lard, pork cracklings	Yes, Baranja and Slavonian kulen, prosciutto, olive oil
Use of local products	Local meat, OPG cheeses	Kulen, prosciutto, cheeses	Local eggs, kulen, fruit, vegetables and dough	OPG cheeses (hard, semi-hard), local fruit and vegetables	Yes, local brandy, fruit and vegetables, OPG cheeses, cured meat products, pork cracklings
Distinction between indigenous and local products	Indigenous – protected; local – everything in Croatia	Indigenous – associated with one area; local – associated with a country	Indigenous – protected; local – someone's home-produced product, production, and otherwise	They are the same	Indigenous – protected, recognizable, labeled; local – fresh, our own production
Use of Baranja cheese	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Use of Baranja kulen	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Opinion on the impact of indigenous products	Yes	Yes, because it is an advantage with foreign guests	Yes, of course	Yes	Yes, if the guest knows how to recognize it
Impact of informing guests	If recommended, they are more likely to order it	Yes, they want to try local and indigenous products	They order it if recommended	Depends on the guest, whether they are a foreign visitor or a regular guest	Depends on the guest's purchasing power, preferences and requirements

Knowledge of Indigenous Products and Quality Labels

All respondents, that is, all 10 hospitality employees, identified at least one product they considered to be a Croatian indigenous or traditional food product. The most frequently mentioned products included kulen, Pag cheese, Istrian prosciutto, prosciutto, brandy, pork cracklings, cured meat products, olive oil, and various regional products. Among respondents from Đakovo

(Table 2), Pag cheese, Istrian prosciutto, and Slavonian kulen were particularly prominent, whereas responses from respondents in Osijek (Table 3) were somewhat more diverse and, in addition to kulen and prosciutto, included pork cracklings, cheeses, olive oil, brandy, Black Slavonian pig, Baranja pepper, and other products from different Croatian regions.

Kulen was one of the most frequently recognized products among the respondents. Some respondents specifically mentioned Baranja kulen, while others referred to kulen in general. Products characteristic of particular Croatian regions were also mentioned, indicating that respondents generally associate the concept of indigeneity with regional recognition, tradition, and the connection of a product with a particular area. Such an association between local food, regional identity, and the tourist experience has also been highlighted in previous research. Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen (2016) reported that local food can play an important role in the tourist experience and destination attractiveness, while Fox (2007) emphasized the importance of gastronomic heritage in shaping the gastronomic identity of Croatian tourist destinations.

The observed difference in the breadth of responses between Osijek and Đakovo may be related to the position of Osijek as a larger urban and regional center and to its more diverse hospitality offering. However, given the small number of respondents, this difference cannot be considered evidence of a systematic difference between the two cities. Rather, it indicates certain patterns within the study group. At the same time, some responses indicate that the concept of an indigenous product is not always clearly defined. For example, one respondent in Đakovo listed the Rimac brand among Croatian indigenous products, while others mentioned the general category of cured meat products. Such responses may indicate an overlap between the concepts of indigeneity, domestic origin, Croatian identity, and general national recognition.

Regarding knowledge of quality labels, six out of ten respondents mentioned a label or sign associated with product quality or origin, whereas four respondents were unable to name any label. The responses included PDO, PGI, "100% Croatian", and "Produced in Croatia".

The responses indicate a certain level of recognition of labels associated with product origin and quality, but also show that some respondents do not distinguish between formal protection schemes and other labels indicating the origin or national affiliation of a product. It is particularly important to distinguish between the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and general labels indicating Croatian origin. The labels "100% Croatian" and "Produced in Croatia" do not represent the same category of protection as the European PDO and PGI schemes.

This finding can be related to the study by Borec et al. (2017), which found that consumers attach importance to product quality and price but have relatively limited recognition of designations of origin and quality. A similar issue in the context of products with protected designations on the Croatian market was examined by Brečić, Tomić Maksan and Đugum (2019), who emphasized the importance of awareness of products bearing protected designations of origin and geographical indications. The results obtained in the present study therefore indicate a need for better knowledge of quality protection schemes not only among consumers but also among individuals involved in shaping and presenting gastronomic offerings.

An example of a formally protected product is Baranja kulen, which is registered at the European Union level as a product with a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) (European Commission, 2015). Its presence in respondents' answers is therefore particularly relevant because it connects the regional recognition of a product with a formally protected status.

Understanding of the Concepts of "Indigenous" and "Local"

The responses to questions concerning synonyms for the terms "indigenous" and "local" revealed a certain degree of terminological inconsistency.

As synonyms for "indigenous", respondents mentioned terms such as "local", "original", "authentic", "from our area", "unique", "rare", "verified", and "high-quality". The most common response was "local", indicating that some respondents consider the two terms to be almost synonymous in everyday contexts.

Various responses were also given for the term "local", including "traditional", "organic", "natural", "indigenous", "home production", "ours", "fresh", and "from our area". Respondents from Đakovo (Table 2) more frequently associated indigeneity with terms such as "local", "original", "natural", and "organic", whereas respondents from Osijek (Table 3) more frequently used terms such as "original", "authentic", "traditional", "unique", and "high-quality". In both cities, the term "local" was most often associated with local origin, production by "our" producers, naturalness, and freshness.

These responses indicate that respondents have an intuitive understanding of the meaning of these concepts, but do not always distinguish them in a manner corresponding to their professional and

regulatory definitions. Traditional and local products may be defined by different characteristics, including origin, production methods, sensory properties, tradition, and association with a particular area (Guerrero et al., 2009). Consequently, the terms "indigenous", "traditional", "local", and "domestic" may have partially overlapping meanings in everyday communication, although they do not necessarily represent the same category.

Responses to the direct question concerning the difference between indigenous and local products further confirmed this inconsistency. Some respondents stated that there was no difference or that the products were "the same", whereas others indicated that indigenous products are associated with a particular area, recognizability, and protection, while local products are associated with production in Croatia or by domestic producers.

One particularly interesting response was given by a respondent who stated that "local is not indigenous", explaining that an indigenous product is "more widely recognizable". A similar line of reasoning can be observed in responses in which indigeneity is associated with a particular geographical area, whereas a local product is viewed more broadly as a product of domestic production.

From a professional perspective, indigeneity may be associated with a characteristic connection between a product and a particular geographical area, tradition, and specific production practices, whereas the term "local" has a broader meaning and may refer to a product of local or national origin without necessarily having a specific protected status. Therefore, the fact that a product is produced in Croatia does not in itself mean that it is an indigenous product.

The results are also important from the perspective of communication with guests. If these terms are used without clear distinction, guests may receive inaccurate information about the origin and characteristics of a product. Conversely, clearly emphasizing the regional origin, tradition, and distinctive characteristics of a product may contribute to its recognizability and experiential value. Čačić Kenjerić and Sokolić (2021) emphasize the importance of local food characteristics and their connection with cultural and social contexts, further highlighting the need for accurate presentation of food heritage.

Therefore, a clearer understanding of the distinction between indigenous and local products could contribute to a higher-quality presentation of local and regional gastronomic offerings and reduce the possibility of inaccurate communication with guests.

Use of Indigenous and Local Products in Hospitality Offerings

All respondents reported using at least one indigenous or traditional product in their hospitality offerings. The products most frequently mentioned included kulen, prosciutto, cured meat products, brandy, olive oil, and other products of a regional character.

In Đakovo, respondents mentioned, for example, kulen, prosciutto, and various cured meat products, while some also mentioned wine, beer, brandy, and other products from local or regional producers. In Osijek, kulen, prosciutto, olive oil, brandy, mlinci, lard, pork cracklings, and other products were also mentioned.

Regarding local products, nine out of ten respondents reported using them. The most frequently mentioned local products were products from family farms (OPGs), local meat, cheeses, fruit and vegetables, eggs, dough, and various cured meat products. One respondent stated that local products were not used in the establishment.

The results indicate that products of local and domestic origin are present in the hospitality offerings of all or almost all surveyed establishments. However, the way respondents described these products again demonstrates that the categories of indigenous and local products frequently overlap. This is consistent with the terminological inconsistency identified above.

It is particularly noteworthy that respondents in Osijek more frequently mentioned specific local food products and products from family farms, including fruit, vegetables, eggs, and cured meat products. This may indicate a stronger connection between some Osijek hospitality establishments and local producers and shorter supply chains. However, given the small sample size, this pattern cannot be generalized to the hospitality sector of Osijek as a whole.

Similar findings can be considered in the context of the study by Kalenjuk Pivarski et al. (2023a), which analyzed the presence of traditional food products in the local hospitality and tourism market based on responses from 300 restaurant employees in managerial positions in Vojvodina. Kalenjuk Pivarski et al. (2023b) further analyzed economic, environmental, social, and tourism-related factors that may be associated with the consumption of traditional food from the perspective of hospitality management. Their findings support a broader view of traditional food as part of hospitality and tourism offerings rather than merely as individual food products.

In the Croatian context, gastronomic heritage can be viewed as one of the elements shaping the gastronomic distinctiveness of a tourist destination (Fox, 2007).

The presence of local and traditional products in hospitality establishments therefore represents one possible means of connecting local production with gastronomic offerings.

Such a connection also has broader economic and tourism significance. Kantar, Pintarić and Svržnjak (2019) emphasize the importance of traditional gastronomic offerings, local producers, and the use of food produced on family farms for the development of rural and gastronomic tourism. Similarly, Đurkin Badurina et al. (2023) highlight the importance of cooperation among different stakeholders in developing authentic gastronomic offerings, whereby connecting local producers, hospitality establishments, and other stakeholders may contribute to creating offerings based on local resources and characteristics of a particular area. In this context, the use of products from local family farms may increase the visibility of local production, contribute to the preservation of traditional food practices, and support the development of a more distinctive gastronomic offering.

Use of Baranja Cheese and Baranja Kulen

Specific questions in the study concerned the use of Baranja cheese and Baranja kulen in hospitality offerings.

Baranja cheese was used by three out of the ten surveyed hospitality establishments. All three establishments using it were located in Osijek, whereas none of the surveyed establishments in Đakovo reported using it.

Baranja kulen was used by eight out of the ten surveyed establishments. In Đakovo, it was used by four out of five establishments, while in Osijek it was also used by four out of five establishments.

Baranja kulen occupies a particularly prominent position among the products identified in the study. Its presence in eight out of ten establishments indicates that it is recognized by the surveyed hospitality employees and is relatively frequently included in their offerings. Its status as a product with a Protected Geographical Indication further confirms its connection with a specific geographical area and quality protection system (European Commission, 2015).

The high prevalence of Baranja kulen may also be considered in the context of its strong regional and gastronomic recognition. In the respondents' answers, kulen frequently appeared as one of the first products associated with Croatian traditional and regional gastronomy. This confirms the relationship between product recognition and its presence in hospitality offerings.

Baranja cheese, in contrast, was considerably less represented. None of the five surveyed establishments in Đakovo reported using it, whereas three out of five establishments in Osijek did so. This result may indicate differences in the representation of particular regional products within the surveyed hospitality offerings, but it does not allow conclusions to be drawn about the reasons for such a difference. Product availability, price, continuity of supply, hospitality operators' habits, menu characteristics, and guest preferences may all influence product use, but these factors were not examined in the present study.

Nevertheless, the lower representation of Baranja cheese compared with kulen may indicate an opportunity to increase the visibility of other regional products in hospitality offerings. In this context, local and traditional products may contribute to differentiating hospitality offerings and shaping the gastronomic identity of a destination (Fox, 2007; Orlić, 2005).

Perceived Importance of Indigenous Products for Hospitality Business Performance

When asked whether they believed that the use of indigenous products contributes to better business performance of a hospitality establishment, all ten respondents gave a positive or conditionally positive answer.

Some respondents simply answered "yes", while others provided additional explanations. One respondent stated that indigenous products should contribute to business performance, "but unfortunately this is not the case", while another emphasized that their importance "matters to some people". One respondent considered their importance to be particularly pronounced among foreign guests, while another stated that their effect depends on whether the guest is able to recognize the value of such a product.

These responses indicate that respondents generally recognize the potential value of indigenous products for hospitality offerings, while at the same time not considering their effect to be the same for all guests. Three interconnected aspects emerged in the responses: product quality, the attractiveness and recognizability of the hospitality offering, and the potential to attract guests, particularly those seeking local and traditional experiences.

These results can be related to studies highlighting the importance of local and traditional food in tourism and hospitality contexts. Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen (2016) emphasize that local food can be a source of destination attractiveness, while Kalenjuk Pivarski et al. (2023b) discuss various economic, social, environmental, and tourism-related factors associated

with traditional food consumption from the perspective of hospitality management.

A similar relationship between local food and tourism offerings was highlighted in the recent study by Tošić et al. (2026), which examined hospitality employees' perceptions of the role of local food in tourism development. The authors also considered the relationship between these perceptions and characteristics of hospitality establishments.

The importance of traditional food in creating regional identity and tourism offerings is also emphasized by Orlić (2005). In this context, an indigenous product may have multiple functions: gastronomic, identity-related, marketing, and tourism-related. Its value to a hospitality establishment derives not only from the food itself but also from the story of its origin, tradition, and connection with the area.

Perceived Influence of Informing Guests on Dish Choice

The final question concerned respondents' assessment of whether information that local or indigenous products are used in the preparation of a dish influences guests' choice.

All respondents gave a positive or conditionally positive response. Some stated that guests "order indigenous and local products more often", that they "would rather order them" if the product were recommended, and that they want to try local and indigenous products. Other respondents qualified their answers according to individual guest characteristics, preferences, purchasing power, or whether the guest was a foreign visitor or a regular customer.

One respondent stated that guests order such products if they are recommended to them, suggesting the potential importance of communication between staff and guests. In this context, hospitality employees may play an important role in presenting products, particularly when guests are unfamiliar with their origin, production methods, or regional significance.

However, this result should not be interpreted as evidence of a direct effect of information on the behavior of all guests, since guest behavior was not directly measured in this study. Rather, the finding reflects hospitality employees' assessments based on their experience. Nevertheless, the fact that all respondents provided a positive or conditionally positive response indicates that hospitality employees consider communication about the origin and characteristics of products to be a relevant part of the offering.

Local food can form part of the tourist experience and represent one of the elements through which a destination distinguishes itself from others (Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016). In this context, information about a product may provide additional value by enabling guests to better understand what they are consuming. This is particularly relevant for products with a strong regional or traditional component.

The results of this study can also be related to the recent study by Cerjak et al. (2025), which, using honey as an example on the Croatian market, demonstrated that information about a quality label can influence product perception. The authors found a positive effect of information about the quality label on product evaluations, supporting the assumption that the way quality and origin are communicated may play an important role in consumer perception.

The mere availability of an indigenous product is not necessarily sufficient to increase its recognition and consumption. Its value may be further emphasized through information about its origin, regional association, traditional production method, or the significance of its quality label. When hospitality employees can clearly and accurately explain these characteristics to guests, the product may acquire additional symbolic and experiential value.

It is particularly important that the information provided to guests be accurate and professionally grounded.

The comparison of hospitality establishments in Osijek and Đakovo shows that the overall patterns are similar: both cities demonstrate a positive perception of indigenous products, their actual use in hospitality, and awareness of their potential contribution to the quality and distinctiveness of the offering. Respondents from Osijek mentioned a somewhat broader range of recognized products, demonstrated a somewhat clearer understanding of the concepts of "indigenous" and "local", and showed somewhat greater awareness of official quality labels. Specific products from local family farms were also mentioned more frequently. However, because of the small and convenience-based sample, these differences should be interpreted as indications of observed patterns rather than statistically confirmed differences between Osijek and Đakovo.

One of the key findings of the study is therefore not only the positive perception of indigenous and local products but also a certain gap between positive attitudes towards these products and the level of knowledge concerning their formal and terminological characteristics. Respondents recognize and use these products and consider them valuable for hospitality offerings, but some of them are not familiar with official quality labels or do not clearly distinguish between the concepts of "indigenous" and "local". This finding has practical significance because the

hospitality sector can play an important role in communicating information about local, traditional, and protected products to final consumers.

Based on the results obtained, there is scope for more systematic cooperation among local producers, hospitality establishments, and the tourism sector. Greater availability of products from local family farms, their inclusion in menus, clear indication of product origin, and education of hospitality employees about the differences between local, indigenous, traditional, and protected products could contribute to their greater visibility.

The results concerning Baranja cheese, for example, show that certain regional products are not represented as widely as products such as kulen, although they may also constitute part of the local gastronomic heritage. Greater inclusion of diverse regional products could contribute to the diversity of gastronomic offerings, while connecting hospitality establishments with local family farms could further strengthen the relationship between local production, hospitality, and tourism (Kantar, Pintarić and Svržnjak, 2019).

The results indicate that indigenous and local products play an important role in perceptions of quality, authenticity, and distinctiveness of hospitality offerings in Osijek and Đakovo. At the same time, the findings indicate a need to improve knowledge concerning the distinction between indigenous and local products and official quality labels. In comparison with previous studies, the results confirm the importance of product quality, origin, and the way products are communicated in shaping their perception, as well as the importance of local and traditional products for the development of gastronomic and tourism offerings (Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016; Fox, 2007; Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2023a, 2023b; Tošić et al., 2026).

More systematic education of hospitality employees, stronger cooperation with local producers, and more active and professionally grounded communication with guests could therefore represent important steps towards increasing the presence and market value of Croatian indigenous products in the hospitality sector. Such education should encompass not only knowledge of the products themselves but also the appropriate use of the terms "indigenous", "local", and "traditional", an understanding of official quality labels, and the ability to present products to guests clearly and credibly.

Conclusion

The study conducted among hospitality employees in Osijek and Đakovo confirmed that indigenous, traditional, and local food products are represented in the offerings of the surveyed establishments. All respondents identified at least one indigenous or traditional product, while nine out of ten reported using local products. Baranja kulen was present in eight out of ten establishments, whereas Baranja cheese was reported in three. These findings highlight the potential of regional food products to contribute to the distinctiveness of hospitality offerings and to strengthen the connection between local food heritage and gastronomic tourism.

Despite the reported use of these products and the generally positive perceptions of their importance, the findings revealed inconsistencies in respondents' understanding of the terms "indigenous" and "local" and in their knowledge of official quality labels. In particular, some respondents treated these terms as synonymous, while protected designation of origin (PDO) and protected geographical indication (PGI) labels were not always distinguished from other labels indicating Croatian product origin. These results suggest that the presence of local and indigenous products in hospitality offerings does not necessarily imply a sufficient understanding of their specific characteristics and quality protection schemes.

The practical significance of these findings lies in identifying opportunities to improve hospitality employees' knowledge of product origin, traditional production practices, and official quality labels. Targeted educational activities and stronger cooperation between hospitality establishments, local producers, and family farms could support more accurate presentation of these products to guests, strengthen their visibility, and contribute to the development of distinctive regional gastronomic offerings. Since hospitality employees play an important role in communicating product characteristics and recommending dishes, their knowledge may also influence how guests perceive and value indigenous and local food products.

Although the study was limited to ten hospitality establishments in Osijek and Đakovo, it provides an initial insight into the relationship between the use of indigenous and local food products and hospitality employees' understanding of their characteristics and quality labels. Future research involving a larger and more diverse sample of establishments, as well as the perspectives of guests and local producers, would help clarify how product knowledge, communication, and quality labels influence food choices and the promotion of regional gastronomic heritage.

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