



ENHANCING COMPETITIVENESS IN GASTRONOMY TOURISM: STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE KVARNER REGION

JAČANJE KONKURENTNOSTI U GASTRONOMSKOM TURIZMU: STRATEŠKE PREPORUKE ZA KVARNER

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Sažetak: Cilj rada je identificirati i razviti strateške preporuke za jačanje konkurentnosti regije Kvarner u području gastronomskog turizma. Korišten je pristup kvalitativnog istraživanja koji je uključivao sesiju brainwritting-a 23 studenta smjera hotelski menadžment. Sesija je provedena pomoću softvera Mural koji je sudionicima omogućio zajednički razvoj i usavršavanje ideja. Prikupljeni podaci zatim su tematski analizirani kako bi se identificirale ključne strategije za razvoj gastronomije na Kvarneru. Iz analize su proizašla četiri primarna strateška područja. Prvo, promicanje lokalnih proizvoda istaknuto je kao bitno za stvaranje snažnog regionalnog identiteta. Drugo, festivali hrane i vina navedeni su kao važni događaji za podizanje profila regije, uz integraciju radionica i seminara koji su predloženi kako bi se poboljšalo iskustvo posjetitelja. Treće, preporučeno je razvoj gastronomskih obrazovnih programa, kako bi se osigurao kontinuitet lokalne gastronomije. Konačno, predložena je suradnja sa školama radi poticanja novih generacija ugostitelja koji su usko povezani s regijom. Ovaj rad doprinosi ograničenoj literaturi o gastronomskom turizmu u regiji Kvarner pružajući strukturiranu analizu strateških preporuka koje dolaze izravno od budućih profesionalaca u hotelskom sektoru. Brainwritting kao metodološki alat u ovom kontekstu pokazuje učinkovitost stvaranja kreativnih i djelotvornih uvida i nudi nov pristup uključivanju dionika u planiranje regionalnog turizma.

Ključne riječi: Gastronomski turizam, regija Kvarner, brainwritting, strateške preporuke

Abstract: This study aims to identify and develop strategic recommendations for improving the competitiveness of the Kvarner region in the field of gastronomy tourism. A qualitative research approach was used, which involved a brainwritting session with 23 hospitality students. The session was conducted using Mural software, which allowed participants to collaboratively develop and refine ideas. The data collected was then analysed thematically to identify key strategies for the development of gastronomy in Kvarner region. Four primary strategic areas emerged from the analysis. Firstly, the promotion of local products was emphasised as essential for creating a strong regional identity. Secondly, wine and gastronomy festivals were identified as important events to raise the profile of the region, with the integration of workshops and seminars suggested to enhance the visitor experience. Thirdly, the development of gastronomic education programmes was recommended to ensure the continuity of local gastronomy. Finally, collaboration with schools was proposed to encourage new generations of restaurateurs who are closely linked to the region. This study contributes to the limited literature on gastronomy tourism in the Kvarner region by providing a structured analysis of strategic recommendations coming directly from future professionals in the industry. The use of brainwritting as a methodological tool in this context demonstrates the effectiveness of generating creative and actionable insights and offers a novel approach to stakeholder engagement in regional tourism planning.

Keywords: Gastronomy tourism, Kvarner region, brainwritting, strategic recommendations

1. Introduction

Gastronomy tourism, which is about exploring local food and culinary traditions, has become a significant trend in the global tourism industry. Regions rich in culinary heritage are increasingly capitalising on their unique culinary offerings to attract tourists seeking authentic cultural experiences (Boniface, 2017; Hjalager, 2002). The Kvarner region on the northern coast of Croatia is one such region with a rich and diverse gastronomic landscape. Known for its distinctive local products, such as Kvarner prawns and local wines, Kvarner has immense potential to become a leading destination for gastronomy tourism (Croatia National Tourist Board, 2022). However, despite its culinary assets, the region has not yet fully realised this potential to make its mark on the global stage.

While the importance of gastronomy tourism has been recognised globally, there is a clear gap in research focusing specifically on the Kvarner region. Existing studies on gastronomy tourism in Croatia often overlook the unique challenges and opportunities that the Kvarner region faces (Albolino, 2014). There is also a lack of comprehensive strategic recommendations tailored to increasing the region's competitiveness in the gastronomy tourism market (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003). This gap in the literature limits the ability of Kvarner stakeholders to effectively utilise their culinary resources and position the region as a top foodie destination (Bessière, 1998).

The purpose of this study is to fill the existing gap by analysing the factors that influence the competitiveness of the Kvarner region in the field of gastronomy tourism. The aim of the study is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the current gastronomic offer of the Kvarner region and to propose strategic measures that could increase the attractiveness of the region for tourists (Okumus et al., 2018). Specific objectives include evaluating the effectiveness of current marketing strategies, exploring opportunities for product development and encouraging greater co-operation between local stakeholders (Hjalager, 2010). By achieving these objectives, the study aims to provide a roadmap for establishing Kvarner as a premier destination for gastronomy tourism.

It is expected that this study will make several important contributions to both academic literature and practical applications. Academically, it will provide a deeper understanding of the role that local food culture plays in improving the tourism competitiveness of a region, with a particular focus on the Kvarner region. Practically, the study will provide actionable insights and strategic recommendations that can be used by local policy makers, tourism stakeholders, and other interest groups to improve the region's gastronomic offer and marketing efforts. Ultimately, this study aims to support the sustainable development of gastronomy tourism in the Kvarner region, contributing to the economic growth and preservation of the region's culture (Croatia National Tourist Board, 2022).

2. Theoretical background

Modern tourists are increasingly looking for an authentic, original experience based on local culture, tradition, a return to nature in the challenges of localisation and globalisation, a synergy of traditional and modern values. Local gastronomy in the affirmation of traditional values and local culture has a great importance in attracting and motivating the (re)arrival of tourists (Gupta et al., 2023) as well as a significant impact on the perception and behaviour of tourists (Choe and Kim, 2018). Factors such as tourists' appreciation of local gastronomy, interest in culinary heritage, and desire for authentic food experiences play a significantly role in influencing their travel decisions and loyalty to destinations (Pu et al., 2024). The consumption of local food has a positive effect on the tourist experience (Williams et al., 2015) as well as on the competitiveness and positioning of the destination (Getz et al., 2014). The research findings (Choe and Kim, 2018) confirm the positive relationship between the influence of food quality and emotional value towards local food and the influence of attitude towards

local food on destination image creation, intention to recommend a destination, intention to visit a destination and the positive impact of destination image of local food on local food recommendation and destination visits. The research also confirms that there is no positive relationship between health value, food price, prestige and interaction on attitudes towards local food.

Local food plays an important role in the renewal of the offer, especially the culinary offer and the role in the promotion and rebranding of the destination, emphasising the active role of the local population in the presentation of local food. Bjoark and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2019) suggest placing a stronger emphasis on local food as a marketing dimension, involving local people by making them aware of their role in the destination foodscape and their importance for travelers' food experiences as part-time marketers, as well as in creating public-private destination spaces where tourists can have more private food experiences. The perception of local gastronomy depends on the tourists' prior knowledge (Perez-Priego et al., 2023) as well as on the orientation towards the target segment (Perez-Galvez et al., 2021). Culturally inspired tourists have a greater interest in consuming and showcasing local food (Huang, 2017).

Local gastronomy plays an important role in the uniqueness, recognisability and competitiveness of a destination. Destination competitiveness has been widely defined as a destination's ability to maximize the utility of its factor endowments by diversifying the provision of tourism products and services to achieve performance superior to that of its competitors. (Song et al., 2023). The model of competitiveness of tourist destinations represents a continuous process of transforming natural resources into competitive advantages based on innovation and excellence, to increase profits and sustainable development. The starting point is an analysis of the current level of competitiveness of the gastronomic offer, the prediction of future trends, the definition of objectives and concrete proposals, the improvement of the offer and the promotion of the valorisation of the human and financial potential in terms of sustainable development and rebranding of the destination. In the field of local gastronomy, the enhancement of local cuisine based on local ingredients is emphasised in order to create a unique gastronomic experience and combine it with local music, colour, decoration and narratives.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection and sample

In this study, data was collected through a brainwriting session conducted using a specialised online software, Mural. Mural is a collaborative digital workspace designed to facilitate brainstorming and creative problem-solving activities (He et al., 2024). The platform offers a variety of features, such as sticky notes, shapes, connections, a chat box, a timer, and voting options that support both individual and group activities.

Kvarner region comprises the area of Primorje-Gorski Kotar County, which covers the island, the coastal region and the mainland. In 2023, it is the third largest county in terms of tourism results, reaching 3.1 million tourist arrivals and 15.6 million overnight stays (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). The geographic and natural diversity and differentiation represent the county's greatest wealth, which is also reflected in the local gastronomy.

The gastronomy of the Kvarner region represents a unique fusion of continental and Mediterranean culinary traditions, making it an unmissable destination for those who want to explore their cultural identity through authentic flavours. Recognised as one of Croatia's gastronomic centres, Kvarner offers a rich selection of gastronomic experiences that reflect both historical influences and contemporary culinary trends.

For tourists who believe that food is the key to understanding the local culture, Kvarner's cuisine offers a deep-rooted sensory journey. The region is home to numerous high-quality restaurants where traditional dishes are reinterpreted and adapted to modern tastes using fresh, local and seasonal ingredients. The experienced chefs in this region skilfully balance authenticity and innovation, creating a 'rhapsody' of flavours, aromas and colours on the plate.

As proof of its excellence, the Kvarner region has introduced the 'Kvarner Gourmet' and 'Kvarner Food' quality seals since 2012 (Kadum, 2022). These seals of approval guide visitors to the region's most important gastronomic establishments and highlight restaurants that offer first-class dishes with a focus on local specialities.

It is highly recommended to embark on a 'gastronomic journey' through Kvarner, where you will have the opportunity to taste dishes characteristic of the region at each location, allowing for a comprehensive exploration. This approach not only promotes an understanding of food, but also offers insights into the social and cultural aspects of life in Kvarner. From a research perspective, Kvarner's gastronomy can be seen as a reflection of historical, social and economic developments and provides a rich framework for analysing cultural heritage through the lens of culinary practises.

In recognition of its outstanding culinary tradition, Kvarner has been named a European Region of Gastronomy for the year 2026, further cementing its status as a premier gastronomic destination in Europe (IGCAT, 2024). The most important goals of gastronomic tourism in Kvarner until 2027 are: Quality and diversity, sustainability Integration into the community, recognition (Akcijski plan razvoja gastronomije Primorsko-goranske županije, 2023). In the development of the gastronomic offer, it is necessary to create additional recognition for the diversity of the enogastronomic offer through existing gastro brands (Akcijski plan razvoja turizma Primorsko-goranske županije do 2027. godine, 2023).

Figure 1 demonstrates that the chosen template was a visual representation of four matrix featuring a gastronomy tourism of the Kvarner region in the center.

Figure 1. Audience analysis temple



Source: Created by authors

The brainwriting session was attended by 23 students enrolled in a Hospitality Management programme on the course Economics of Catering Business in summer semester of the 2023/2024 academic year. The students are second-year students at the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management in Opatija. The 23 students who participated in the brainwriting session were specifically selected based on their enrolment in a hospitality management programme, which correspond to the sample size (Wilson, 2013). This particular group was selected because of their academic background and their focus on the hospitality industry, which includes areas such as tourism, gastronomy and service management. Through their education, they have relevant knowledge and insight into the dynamics of the tourism and hospitality industry, making them well suited to contribute valuable perspectives on improving the competitiveness of gastronomy tourism in the Kvarner region. Furthermore, as future professionals in the industry, their ideas and suggestions are particularly relevant for the development of practical, innovative strategies that can be implemented in practice. These students participated in a structured, multi-stage brainwriting process aimed at generating ideas and insights to improve gastronomy tourism in the Kvarner region. The process was designed to encourage the free flow of ideas while minimising the influence of dominant participants so that a wide range of perspectives could be captured.

The structured nature of the brainwriting session combined with the interactive features of the Mural platform enabled an efficient and organised data collection process. Participants were able to contribute ideas asynchronously, engage in discussions, and vote on the most promising concepts, resulting in a comprehensive data set for analysis.

3.2. Data analysis

The data collected in the brainwriting session was analysed using a thematic approach to identify the most important strategic areas for the improvement of gastronomy tourism in the Kvarner region. The analysis focused on categorising the ideas and insights generated into different themes that reflect the key components necessary for the development and promotion of gastronomy tourism in the region.

The mind map created during the session, shown in the figure, highlights four main thematic areas: Promotion of local products: This theme emerged as a crucial area for strengthening the region's gastronomic identity. Two key strategies were identified in the analysis: educating locals about the promotion of local products and showcasing the region's gastronomy diversity. These strategies emphasise the importance of engaging the local population and celebrating Kvarner's unique culinary heritage.

Food and wine festivals: Another important theme was the role of food and wine festivals in enhancing the culinary experience and showcasing the region's diverse culinary offer. The data suggests organising workshops and seminars on food and wine to attract locals and tourists and thus increase the visibility of the region as a gastronomic destination.

Culinary education programmes: The analysis also revealed the need for ongoing culinary education. Workshops and courses focussing on culinary techniques and food preservation were seen as crucial for maintaining high standards in local cuisine and ensuring that traditional practices are passed on to future generations.

Collaboration with schools: Integrating culinary education into the curriculum and collaborating with educational institutions was cited as a strategy to foster a new generation of culinary professionals and enthusiasts. This theme emphasises the long-term benefits of encouraging an early interest in the culinary arts. This theme was seen as crucial for educational institutions to play a direct role in

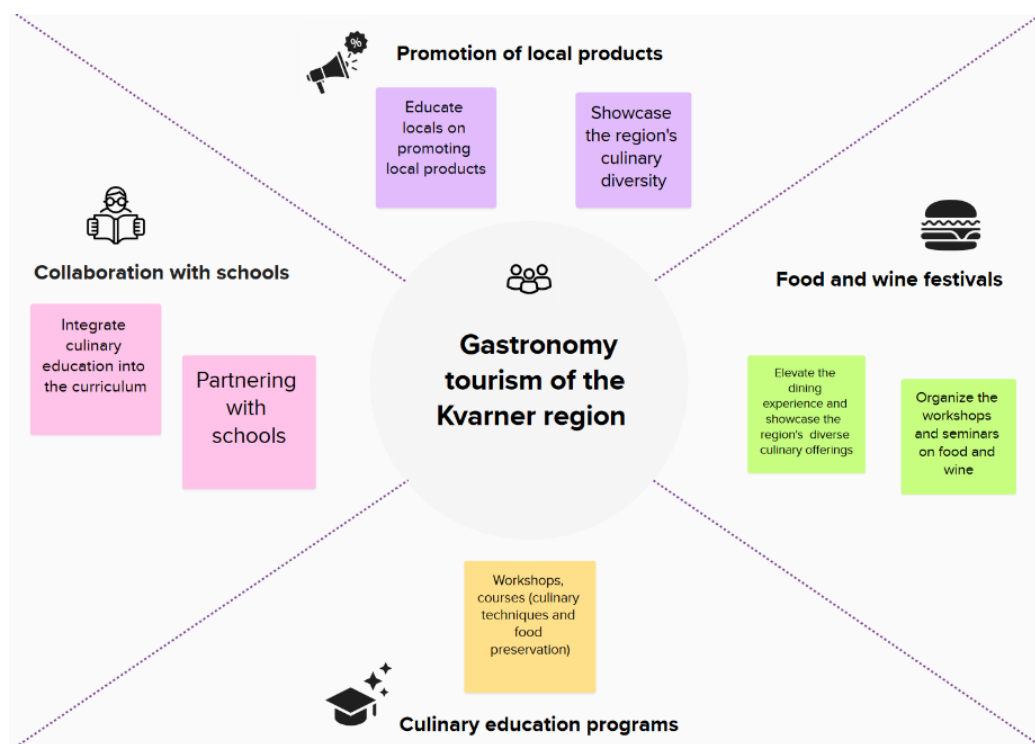
promoting gastronomy tourism. By involving schools in these initiatives, there is an opportunity to create lasting interest and engagement among younger generations.

These thematic areas provide a structured framework for strategic recommendations aimed at improving the competitiveness of the gastronomy tourism sector in the Kvarner region. The findings emphasise the importance of a holistic approach that includes promotion, education, collaboration and community engagement.

4. Results

The insights gathered from the 23 students during the brainwriting session were structured and analysed to align with the primary objectives of the research. The analysis revealed several strategic areas that are essential for increasing the competitiveness of gastronomy tourism in the Kvarner region. These areas are visualised in Figure 2, which contains the key themes and strategies identified during the collaborative brainstorming process.

Figure 2. Brainwriting results



Source: Created by authors using online template: www.mural.co/templates/

4.1. Promotion of local products

The student participants identified the promotion of local products as a fundamental strategy for improving gastronomy tourism in the Kvarner region. They suggested that educating the local population about the value and importance of regional products could foster a stronger bond between locals and their culinary heritage and thus increase their participation in tourism activities. Furthermore, showcasing Kvarner's culinary diversity through local products could help differentiate the region in a competitive global market.

This perspective is in line with previous research that emphasises the role of local products in creating unique and authentic tourist experiences. For example, Sims (2009) argues that local food not only contributes to the distinctiveness of a destination, but also supports sustainable tourism by supporting the local economy and preserving cultural heritage. Similarly, Everett and Aitchison (2008) emphasise that tourists are increasingly looking for authentic experiences and that local produce plays a crucial role in meeting this demand. The students' suggestions are therefore well supported by the existing literature and reinforce the idea that promoting local produce can significantly increase the competitiveness of a region's gastronomy tourism offer. Under the conditions of globalisation, in which more and more demanding tourists are looking for local gastronomy and want to get to know local values, traditional cuisine must have the function of affirming localisation in contrast to a uniform, globalised offer.

4.2. Food and wine festivals

Food and wine festivals were another key strategy suggested by the students. They recognised these events as platforms that can enhance the culinary experience and attract both domestic and international tourists to the Kvarner region. The participants suggested that well-organised festivals could serve as a showcase for the region's culinary offer and give tourists the opportunity to get to know the local food culture in an immersive and enjoyable way.

This suggestion is consistent with the findings of previous studies that have identified food and wine festivals as powerful tools for tourism development. For example, Getz and Brown (2006) find that such festivals not only boost the local economy by attracting visitors, but also help to cement a destination's reputation as a culinary center. Furthermore, Hall and Sharples (2008) argue that food festivals can stimulate interest in regional cuisine and create a sense of place, which is crucial for tourist retention in the destination. Local enogastronomic events, food and wine festivals offer a great opportunity for the development and affirmation of local gastronomy in the function of increasing the attractiveness of the destination, regardless of the tourist upgrading of the destination, even in small rural areas as a haven of local, rural culture and gastronomy, which is crucial for the development of less touristy micro-destinations (Ossovska et al. 2023, Kwiatkowski et al., 2020). This can be seen in the influx of tourists looking for unique, engaging and memorable experiences that are authentic to the place they are visiting, including the local gastronomy (Cadoso et al., 2014). Local gastronomy must be complemented by local traditional music, dance and customs.

The fact that the students focussed on food and wine festivals is thus in line with established research and shows that these events can play a crucial role in the strategic development of gastronomy tourism in Kvarner.

4.3. Culinary education programmes

The students also proposed the development of culinary education programmes, including workshops and courses on culinary techniques and food preservation. They argued that such programmes would not only improve the skills of those working in the culinary field, but also preserve traditional culinary knowledge and ensure that it is passed on to future generations.

Previous research has shown that culinary education is a key factor in maintaining and improving the gastronomic reputation of a region. According to Wolf (2006), culinary training programmes contribute to the overall quality of food tourism by ensuring that professionals are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to provide quality culinary experiences. In the education process, the link with practise, the involvement of top chefs, sommeliers, winemakers, presentations of traditional and contemporary cuisine based on local food is of central importance. On the other hand,

gastronomy and wine tourism practitioners are constantly seeking to gain knowledge to improve business management (Rašan et al. 2024). The focus must also be on the marketing presentation, the link with storytelling, tradition and customs to connect the past, the present and the future and create a unique experience for the tourist.

In addition, Balazs (2012) emphasises the role of culinary education in preserving traditional eating habits, which are often a major attraction for food tourists. The students' focus on education is consistent with these findings and suggests that investment in culinary education could strengthen Kvarner's position as a leading gastronomic destination.

4.4. Cooperation with schools

Finally, the students identified co-operation with schools as a crucial strategy to promote gastronomy tourism. They suggested integrating culinary education into school curricula and forming partnerships between schools and the tourism sector. This approach, they argued, would not only raise awareness of the region's culinary heritage among younger generations, but would also produce a new generation of culinary professionals deeply rooted in local traditions.

This proposal is echoed in the academic literature, which emphasises the importance of education for the development of tourism. According to Pizam and Milman (1993), early exposure to tourism-related education can stimulate interest in the industry and encourage students to pursue careers in the field. It is necessary to recognise the dignity and attractiveness of professions related to gastronomy in order to increase young people's interest in school programs. Furthermore, Ritchie and Crouch (2003) emphasise the potential of educational institutions to play a central role in the development of destinations by nurturing talent and driving innovation. The students' suggestions for collaboration with schools are therefore consistent with existing research and suggest that such partnerships could be an important part of a comprehensive strategy to promote gastronomy tourism in the Kvarner region.

Strengthening the competitiveness of gastronomy tourism in the Kvarner region is a continuous process of improving and innovating the gastronomic offer by enhancing local ingredients and creating recognisable specialities in order to market Kvarner as a competitive destination for gastronomy and unforgettable experiences. Gastronomy tourism must be included in all strategic documents, as well as specific activities and measures in synergy with specific forms of tourism to transform Kvarner from a distinctly seasonal destination of seaside tourism into a highly attractive destination of year-round tourism. The transformation of tourism and gastronomy in Kvarner requires the synergy of all stakeholders, with the active involvement of the local population and tourists as co-creators of the offer. When implementing new trends in the gastronomic offer, continuous monitoring is required as a starting point for constant innovation of the offer in terms of excellence, originality and recognition.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to develop strategic recommendations for improving the competitiveness of gastronomy tourism in the Kvarner region, based on the findings from a brainwriting session with hospitality students. The applied methodology, a multi-stage brainwriting process supported by the Mural software, enabled the collection of diverse and creative ideas from the participants (Oseland, 2023). The structured analysis of these ideas revealed key strategies in four main areas: promotion of local products, food and wine festivals, culinary education programmes, and collaboration with schools.

The results underline the importance of using local products to strengthen the region's gastronomic identity, organising food and wine festivals to attract tourists, developing comprehensive culinary education programmes and encouraging collaboration between schools and the food and drink sector. These strategies are not only in line with the students' suggestions, but are also supported by the existing literature, which emphasises their effectiveness in improving the competitiveness of gastronomy tourism.

However, this study is not without limitations. The sample size was limited to 23 students, which may not fully capture the broader perspectives of other stakeholders in the region, such as local businesses, policy makers, and tourists. Furthermore, the study focused exclusively on the Kvarner region, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other regions with different cultural and economic realities. For future development, it is crucial to define a strategy for the development of gastronomy tourism that synergistically connects stakeholders at all levels in creating a recognisable Kvarner cuisine based on autochthonous food, recipes from the past, creating experiences for the present and the future, and connecting with cultural customs, traditions and other forms of offer with marketing rebranding.

Future research should aim to include a broader range of participants and consider comparative studies with other regions to validate and extend the findings of this study. In addition, longitudinal studies could be conducted to assess the long-term impact of the recommended strategies on the region's gastronomy tourism sector. By addressing these limitations and exploring these avenues, future research can provide deeper insights and more robust strategies to improve the competitiveness of gastronomy tourism not only in Kvarner but also in other regions.

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