

# Enhancement of quality food products through tourism: The case of tourism offices of the North of Portugal

**Promoção** dos produtos de **indicação geográfica** através do turismo: O caso dos **postos de turismo** do Norte de Portugal

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**Keywords** | Quality food products, geographical indications, rural development, tourism offices, North of Portugal

**Objectives** | This work aims to discuss the relationship between the Geographical Indication (GI) products in the North of Portugal and their inclusion in the regional tourism development strategy, through the mediating role of tourism offices, potential influencers of the destination's image. This case study's main goal is to understand if and how tourism offices in the North of Portugal contribute for the promotion of local quality food products and how their positioning in the promotion strategy is perceived. Another goal is to understand if producers make use of tourism offices to attain complementary promotion of their products. This led to the hypotheses formulation: H1: Tourism offices in the North of Portugal include the promotion of certified quality food products in their tourism marketing strategy; H2: Tourism offices in the North of Portugal are used as promotional vehicles for certified quality food products.

**Methodology** | In order to understand the cooperation and interaction between tourism and regional quality products, the Tourism Strategic Marketing Plan for the North of Portugal and its "Gastronomy and Wine" strategic product were studied, as well as the GI's market and its distribution throughout the region, leading to a selection of the participants and places to visit.

Using a qualitative approach, unstructured and semi-structured interviews were conducted, having 24 participants in total. The unstructured interviews focused on understanding the importance of local GI's for the promotion of tourism and their inclusion in current tourism strategies. The interviewees were decision-makers or main actors, namely: five city mayor representatives; two directors of Local Development Associations; one expert (PhD in Agricultural Sciences), a producers' group leader; and two representatives of Porto and North of Portugal (TPNP), the legal regional tourism official entity. For the semi-structured interviews, 15 tourism offices were contacted from the total 86. The criteria

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were the higher number of times each municipality was included as a geographical area of production. As 8 accepted to collaborate, 13 tourism offices' workers were interviewed. For this data collection, an interview script was specifically developed, divided in sections with main study objectives: work experience and determination for future learnings; the Region and local quality food products knowledge and future proposals for the subject. Data analysis consisted in qualitative screening and grouping of the respondents' answers.

**Main Results and Contributions** | In the tourism offices visited for this study, the European logo for GI's and the local products under the quality certification were not identified by the majority of the professionals. The interest in typical food, where to buy and to consume is frequent, but the attention in the history linked to the product is increasing, reinforcing trends and the new visitors' concerns. To follow these needs, as institutional written information about local food products was scarce and limited, it was frequent to see tourism offices' workers organizing information by their own initiative. The inclusion of quality food products' promotion in the tourism offices marketing strategy was not perceived by the interviewees, especially in a regional context. Isolated initiatives were, however, observed, mainly when the tourism offices are attached or integrated within other tourism infrastructures, like thematic centers or museums.

Overall, tourism offices' workers had a superior qualification average and a satisfactory level of work fulfilment and personal involvement. They all demonstrated the need and willing for additional training and tuition in the subject, since the information about local food products spread to visitors is predominantly verbal. In Interactive Tourism Shops, a digital support is provided, but despite the expectation, information about local food products is not always available, nor complete. The lack of written information on local food products led to the general claim of institutional support documents/brochures and guides. When given the possibility of deciding on how the need of training and tuition could be fulfilled, workshops and visits to local producers was the unanimous answer.

In the unstructured interviews, some worries about the production of quality food products were, for instance, producers' lack of entrepreneurship and their deficiency in training, little involvement, limited production, lack of producers' group's market strategies, their failure to attract associates and production outside the certification. These concerns were mentioned by the City Hall representatives and also by the regional Tourism Entity, as part of the difficulties for promoting these products in a more consistent and broader way. Concerning the relation between tourism, tourism offices and the use of local products as means of promoting the region, the lack of cooperation is quite referred. For the regional tourism strategies, "not much is said" and only isolated initiatives are announced. The Local Development Associations alleged that "tourism bodies work with their backs turned". According to them, it is the Regional Tourism Entity that has the obligation to supervise and ensure proper promotion of local resources and heritage, from restaurants to tourism offices. It was only possible to obtain feedback from one of the producer's groups, who replied that "there is no regular cooperation between this entity and the local tourism offices towards the promotion of local products". For this research, both formulated hypotheses were rejected.

**Limitations** | The main limitations of this study include the non-participation of producers' groups. Their participation was to be fundamental, but the majority of contact attempts were unfruitful (e.g., returned emails, invalid phone numbers and addresses, unavailable employees, bankrupted and/or closed

companies). Other constraints on obtaining a larger number of interview samples were, for example, the explored territory size versus time and budget available.

**Conclusions** | “Gastronomy and Wine” is considered a strategic product in the North, but some proposals in the marketing action plans for this sector are still to be accomplished. Claiming the valorization of local resources, as well as the need to reduce asymmetries among northern sub-destinies, tourism entities consider the involvement of all local and regional entities, private and public, as an important asset for a sustainable tourism development strategy. But the participant entities said not to perceive this involvement. Also, cooperation habits towards the use of tourism offices by producers’ groups as a tool for promoting their own products was reported not to exist, leading to the lack of cooperation habits between the sectors.

The sector of qualified products shows limitations in the application of an enhancement strategy, mainly organizational and commercial. The cooperation and coordination among all intervening actors are not evidenced, as well as the lack in dynamism through the market chain. These factors lead to a deficiency in the use of the local resources potential. Tourism represents a major important tool for boosting the enhancement of local quality products, especially in rural areas. These products, not always valued, represent the Northern rich tradition and cultural heritage and should be used as a crucial asset for tourism differentiation, towards a regional sustainable development.

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