

Sweetening tourist experiences: A new approach to food tourism in rural areas

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Abstract | While the relationships between food and tourism are largely analysed, the study of the role of sweets in food tourism is limited. This research presents a study of rural producers of sweets, alfajores and jams in the Campos, Ríos y Lagunas region of the Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina, with the objective to analyse the challenges and opportunities of the elaboration of sweets as an agricultural activity, and the contribution it makes to local communities through the process of awarding tourism value to local products. Based on interviews with twelve local producers, results show the difficulties for the protection and promotion of the local product and discuss the role of the producers in sweet-based food tourism. This research addresses a gap in food tourism based on the role of sweets in the planning and development of rural tourism. While this activity generates synergies that contribute to regional economic development, future collaboration and cooperation among public and private stakeholders will increase the relevance of sweet products in tourism.

Keywords | agriculture, Argentina, food tourism, local development, sweet product.

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1. Introduction

Food tourism practice and research have experienced an impressive growth during the last couple of decades with recent publications that have also provided an overview of the state of the topic (Ellis et al., 2018; Everett, 2019; Okumus et al., 2021; Rachão et al., 2019). One trend in food tourism research focuses on examining how local products contribute to enhancing the competitive edge of destinations (Knollenberg et al., 2021). Special attention has been given to food and drink items such as beer (Plummer et al., 2005), bread (Taş Gürsoy, 2020), cheese (Fusté-Forné, 2020), chocolate (Jeon et al., 2020), coffee (Woyesa & Kumar, 2021), potatoes (Noguer-Juncà et al., 2021), salt (Silva & Carneiro, 2023), and tea (Jolliffe & Aslam, 2009), among others.

However, few studies have focused on the elaboration of sweet products (Chairy & Syahrivar, 2019; Ginés-Ariza et al., 2022). The present paper adds an innovative approach to the study of food in the development of rural areas, following and expanding previous research that have, for example, analysed sweet products (sugared almonds) in Portugal (Bernardo & Rodrigues, 2020). In particular, this research fills a research gap in the study of food tourism focused on the underexplored role of sweets and provides new insights into their potential as drivers of rural tourism and regional economic development. In this sense, food tourism activities must embrace the landscapes of a destination in a broad perspective and understand how the producers perform in the development of food offerings because the seeking of authenticity by tourists *is more visible in the local's space* (Park & Widayanta, 2022).

This paper aims to analyse the role of sweet products in the development of rural areas and the relationship between food and tourism as a territorial development activity based on sweet products as a source of 'place' (Sims, 2010), from the perspective of producers of sweet products, where examples such as *dulce de leche*, a sweet milk product elaborated in rural Argentina, stands as part of the national gastronomy (Pérez, 2021). Based on the case of rural sweet producers in the Campos, Ríos y Lagunas region, this study highlights how small-scale agricultural activities can be reimagined as cultural and tourism assets, which contribute to the diversification of local economies. The novelty of this paper also lies in its intersectional approach, which connects agricultural practices, local entrepreneurship, and the tourism value chain through food.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Food as a manifestation of culture

The Committee of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) meets every year to evaluate the candidacies presented by states. In these meetings they must decide about the inscription of cultural practices and expressions of intangible heritage. The objective is to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage, including culinary arts and food traditions (UNESCO, 2003). According to Timothy (2016), in its list of intangible cultural heritage, the UNESCO protects and promotes both production and consumption habits, aromas and flavours, through ingredients and recipes that show strong connections between people, places and practices.

While food is a tangible product that can be consumed (Navarro & Schlüter, 2010), it also carries implicit cultural and social value (Nemes et al., 2023). Therefore, it constitutes a fundamental means of expression of the tradition of communities (Espeitx, 2004). As part of culture, food has an emotional and historical value which is appreciated by food tourism (Berno, 2023). In the context of rural Argentina food tourism, Magri-Harsich (2020) noted that food tourism is a trend in which tourists place significant value on culinary and cultural heritages. This niche form of tourism encourages active participation from tourists (Carvalho et al., 2023), where both food and wine experiences contribute to the co-creation of value in the sector (Rachão et al., 2021) because the tourist feels motivated to consume the traditional products of the region, they experience the local tradition through gastronomy, thus acquiring knowledge in the consumption of that food or drink.

On many occasions, tourists are interested in learning about the origins of food and drinks and visit the places where they are produced (Yılmaz & Kumar, 2023). This type of tourism often occurs in rural areas with rich culinary traditions (Kovalenko et al., 2023), which is why food tourism is frequently closely associated with rural tourism (Fusté-Forné, 2015). This implies tasting local products in a unique environment, such as a food festival or a village inn (Schlüter & Thiel Ellul, 2008). The uniqueness of local products in food tourism relies on the ability to taste, both physically and symbolically, a food or a drink which is typical of the region and is experienced where it is produced (Ingrassia et al., 2023). Additionally, Navarro and Schlüter (2010) argue that food tourists do not have to come from foreign countries to appreciate a place's culture. Even between relatively close regions, significant cultural differences can be found –

such as those between the culinary traditions of the countryside and the city, which are also interconnected (Hall & Gössling, 2016). In this sense, the connection between places of production and consumption is important to understand sustainable food tourism management and marketing (Park et al., 2019), and the planning and development of authentic food tourist experiences.

2.2.The food tourist searches in the countryside

Food tourism has positioned itself as one of the fundamental reasons for travelling (Barzallo et al., 2023) with food increasingly becoming a factor of tourism attraction, even for domestic tourists (Apak & Gürbüz, 2023). Moreover, food can act as a differentiating element in the competitiveness environment of destinations (Knollenberg et al., 2021). While traveling is also the search of otherness, that is, of what is strange and unknown to one's own subjective experience (Quan & Wang, 2004), food is a fundamental part of the tourist experience (see, for example, Cohen & Avieli, 2004) that tourists not only seek to taste but also to find a sensory experience (Everett, 2008). According to Hjalager (2002), the sensory aspect of food tourist experiences is crucial for tourists to attach the value of authenticity where the acquisition of knowledge is also relevant for tourist motivation and satisfaction (Jiang et al., 2023). Food tourists seek memorable experiences (Stone et al., 2018), different from those they have already experienced, and food tourism must offer a unique and aesthetically attractive experience (Tsai & Wang, 2017). If tourists have a memorable food experience (Sthapit et al., 2023), they tend to continue to consume the products upon returning to their usual environment.

Previous research has attempted to identify the types of food tourist (Tikkanen, 2007). Mitchel and Hall (2003) segmented food tourists based on their interest and involvement in food, which is also similarly applied in recent research regarding the food motivation, where authors such as Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016) identified the *experiencers* (for whom food is an essential part of travel) and the *enjoyers* (for whom food is an important aspect of their trip). Furthermore, Fields (2002) states that the food tourist views gastronomy as a fundamental aspect of the travel experience and actively seeks information about the region's culinary heritage, including locally produced items and establishments that serve traditional food. In this sense, Hjalager (2002) also highlights that food tourists search for a learning component in tourism experiences. As a result, they tend to avoid overtly tourist-oriented restaurants, which may be perceived as offering staged products and services (Pham & Lapointe, 2023). This type

of food tourist prefers to go to those places where the locals eat daily, such as markets (Dimitrovski & Crespi-Vallbona, 2018), also including in the visit the places of production and the participation in the production processes, for example, cooking (Kokkranikal & Carabelli, 2021; Rachão et al., 2020).

Richards (2021) explains the growing role of co-creation of food tourism experiences, indicating the interaction between consumers and producers. He also states that food tourism links identity, culture, and place, which are manifested in authentic food tourist experiences. Oliveira (2007) states that a growing number of visitors consider food as a chance to get to know the local culture (see, also, Rachão et al., 2019). The present paper explores the creation of knowledge in food tourism from the perspectives of the inhabitants of the region, the local producers and, specifically, based on the traditional sweet products elaborated in rural Argentina. The producers can enhance the visibility of their work, foster regional branding, and contribute to the tourism system through the process of awarding tourism value to sweets, which impacts the economic, environmental and social development.

2.3. Food, local agriculture and regional economic development

Many authors consider that tourism contributes to the economy of rural or impoverished regions. In this sense, at the beginning of the century, Kivela (2006) mentioned as examples countries such as Croatia or Vietnam that, after having suffered the calamity of war, have rebuilt their economy from the tourism industry and where the food element has been the key. This is also due to the globalisation (Quan & Wang, 2004), with the modernisation of agriculture and a greater environmental awareness that have generated that people begin to express interest in having greater contact with culture and nature through food (Fusté-Forné, 2022). This situation acts as a reason for the development of food products (Chandra & Diehl, 2019) and, with it, the diversification of the rural economy (Li & Liu, 2019).

Food and drink products generate the opportunity for food events and tours (see Okumus, 2021), where purchases are made directly at the farms, fresh products are provided to restaurants, and dining places that offer typical local menus are opened. However, for food tourism to effectively serve rural development, the existence of adequate articulation between the production of raw materials, the foods that make up the dishes and menus, and the tourism industry is necessary (Magri-Harsich, 2020). This means that food producers must be able to supply local agrifood shops and restaurants (Cavallo & Olivieri, 2022) to avoid bringing local products from other

areas. According to a study carried out by the National Association of Farmers of the United Kingdom, Schlüter (2006) indicated that the existence of local producers generating various benefits are of great importance for food tourism. This is also observed in recent research that calls for the planning and development of short food supply chains (Ginés-Ariza et al., 2022; Haven-Tang et al., 2022).

In this sense, food tourism must rely on a direct relationship between the producer and the consumer (Ladwein & Romero, 2021), which allows the producers to establish the price of the products, knows the consumers and the market. When the sale occurs without intermediaries, the need for transport and packaging is less or almost unnecessary, reducing the total costs of the product. In addition, direct contact between the consumers and the product allows the consumers to know where the raw materials come from and the producer behind the product (Fusté-Forné and Berno, 2016). Buying zero-kilometre food does not only result in food that is fresher and tastier but also in a growing awareness among the consumers, educated about the origin of the products and their contribution to the regional economic and sustainable development (Star et al., 2020; Zavaleta-González et al. 2022). The sustainable relations between production and consumption engage consumers with local producers (Buenaventura & López, 2021) and encourages consumers support for local environment (Chandra & Diehl, 2019).

3. Methodology

3.1. Study context

With the objective of analysing the situation of sweet products and the relationship they establish with food tourism in the Campos, Río y Lagunas region of the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina, the authors have built a qualitative study that analyses the case of the Buenos Aires area of the Salado River basin through interviews with the local producers. The area is established because it is a destination which is close to the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. In this sense, the accessibility of the national route 205 offers the region greater visibility to the region, which has a focus on rural tourism, with food producers playing an increasing role as hosts. The municipalities included in the analysis are Roque Pérez, Tapalqué, Lobos, General Alvear, 25 de Mayo, and Saladillo. The six municipalities host a food event which allows them to build a sustainable connection between producers and consumers, and where sweet products and *dulce de leche* have a vital role in local culture.

In this sense, *dulce de leche* is “a sweet food, originally from Latin America, made from milk that has been caramelised (cooked slowly with sugar) until it becomes sweet and brown” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). According to previous research, this sweet product is not only original from Latin America, but also traditional in Latin America (Vargas et al., 2021). Few previous research analysed *dulce de leche* in tourism based on the Sweet Milk Fest in the municipality of Cañuelas (Pérez Winter, 2021). They examined the event as a cultural and tourism product to protect and promote, with tensions as the author argues, the local economy through tourism. In this paper, we look at the perspectives of the producers, to explore the potential, challenges and opportunities of sweet products, also *dulce de leche*, in the planning and development of food tourism in rural Argentina.

3.2. Data collection

The producers were selected based on the databases of the local boards of tourism of each municipality in the region. Also, the implementation of a snowball sampling technique allowed the researchers to have a list of producers larger than the official lists provided by the municipalities. This was part of the preparation process between the months of March and June 2022, where the first researcher visited each tourism board, municipality by municipality, and compiled the list of producers. The sample consisted of a total number of 71 producers in the region that include families, individuals and cooperatives. Among them, 12 were producers of sweet products, and all of them have adhered to the analysis. They represent the study sample and, added to *dulce de leche*, they also produce alfajores, jams and other sweets.

Table 1. The producers' characteristics (own source)

Gender	Age	Municipality
Female	50	General Alvear
Female	47	Lobos
Female	41	Lobos
Female	38	Roque Pérez
Female	49	Roque Pérez
Female	55	Roque Pérez
Female	62	Saladillo
Female	65	Saladillo

Male	52	Saladillo
Female	59	Tapalqué
Female	36	Tapalqué
Female	54	Tapalqué

Source: Own Elaboration

Data collection was carried out directly at the places of production between the months of June and November 2022 in the mentioned municipalities, utilising semi-structured interviews. The interviews, which allow interviewees to express their opinions and perspectives on a specific topic, were conducted directly in the towns. This approach aligns with the methods outlined by Longhurst (2009) and Scanlan (2020), who emphasized that interviews are effective for capturing participants' viewpoints and perspectives. In this paper, interviews were used to understand the role of sweet products in the development of rural areas and to explore the relationship between food and tourism. The research team developed the interview protocol based on prior research, encompassing three categories of questions: a) the food production based on sweets as a traditional agricultural activity in rural Argentina; b) the situation of food product marketing; and c) the relationship between sweet production and food tourism to understand the current and potential challenges and opportunities.

The interviews were conducted by the first researcher, with each semi-structured interview lasting an average of 45 minutes. The average experience of these producers is ten years. Half of them stated that the sales of the sweets products is their main source of income. For the rest, it is a complementary activity to the work they do daily. Some of them harvest their own fruits and others have cattle and produce their own *dulce de leche*. Table 1 shows the participants and the municipalities where they work.

3.3. Data analysis

All the interviews were transcribed, and thematic data analysis was conducted in the original language of the interview. The data analysis was executed using a content analysis approach, which adds depth to the comprehension of specific facets of tourism that may have been overlooked in previous research (Yousuf & Backer, 2015). This approach involves organising and codifying data, as outlined by Guthrie et al. (2004), with a focus on insights derived from interviews (Noguer-Juncà et al., 2021). Content analysis is particularly suitable for exploring

individual perceptions and identifying themes arising from the interviews, as demonstrated by Yan et al. (2022).

The data analysis was carried out through a collaborative process based on qualitative thematic analysis. The first researcher conducted the coding of the data, with themes identified in collaboration with the third researcher. This involved multiple readings of the materials to allow for the generation of the categories. Subsequently, the themes were cross-checked for consistency within the other authors. This process facilitated the identification of both the current situation and potential relationships between sweet products and food tourism. The themes derived from the data analysis are presented in the next section and include the production of sweets as an agricultural activity, the challenges of food product marketing, and tourism planning and development in rural areas.

4. Results

This section is divided into three sub sections that discuss the production of sweets as an agricultural activity, explores the challenges of food product marketing faced by the producers, and debates the opportunities derived from the participation of the producers in food tourism. Results show the potential of sweets as authentic, place-based products that connect visitors to the region but also reveal the structural barriers that producers face, such as limited access to markets, which are often overlooked in discussions of food tourism. This section also highlights the need for collaborative efforts among stakeholders to protect and promote local sweet products.

4.1. The production of sweets as an agricultural activity

Most of the producers engage in this activity individually, while five of them run it as a family enterprise. These enterprises involve the entire family in cultivation, production, and processing. Children and their parents collaborate in the field, while women are the ones responsible for production. In some cases, once the fruit is available, all family members participate in the production process. Some young family members take care of labelling, including colours, design, and branding. The primary input used by the producers is fruit and they show appreciation for the source of the product. As one participant explained, “Thanks to the fruit trees at my mother's house, we can make orange jam and have our family business.”

In many cases, they use their own fruit crops, while in other cases, they buy fruit from local markets for subsequent jam-making. Only one producer has received formal training and education, while another describes it as self-taught. The other ten inherited the culinary heritage from their mothers or grandmothers. “My grandmother used to make jams, then my mother, and now I do it with my family”. They mention that they do not have a specific recipe but learned to make sweets through observation. Observation is a way of learning, as stated by some of the interviewees. As their grandmothers or mothers made jams and sweets, the younger generations watched and observed the production, processing, and packaging process. In this way, through intergenerational communication, they learned the craft. There is only one male producer; the other 11 are women. This highlights the revaluation of women as rural gastronomic producers. As mentioned earlier, even though entire families are involved in the business, it is mostly the women who engage in the actual production. It is also worth noting that women produce to support the family, maintain the household, and raise their children, serving as the primary source of income.

In the same vein, they acknowledge that consumers are aware of the seasonality of the ingredients, understanding that during certain times of the year, they will not find jams made from fruits that are out of season. For example, in winter, there are no strawberries available for making blackberry jam, which is a spring-summer fruit. It is interesting to note that respecting seasonality is crucial because fruits are not altered to accelerate their growth, and they retain their nutrients and properties as they are consumed during the time of year when they can actually be harvested. This contributes to healthy eating, where the natural season of cultivation is respected. One of the producers stated that “we do not use agrochemicals in our production. We make healthy products that our neighbours can buy”, which emphasises the proximity of food production.

All the interviewees sell directly to the consumer, and they acknowledged they usually do it as a family, which allows them to share responsibilities and skills, and reinforce family and community connections. They sell their products at local markets, gastronomic fairs, and, in many cases, through social media by taking orders and delivering them directly to the consumers’ specified locations, often without intermediaries. Since they do not have a physical store, some producers mention that on rainy days, as the area consists of several neighbourhoods with dirt roads, they are unable to deliver products. Consequently, delivery days are modified due to weather conditions. If the agreement with the consumer is altered by the weather, the producers do not charge. Unlike typical online purchases where the customer pays first and then

receives the product, here the exchange occurs simultaneously. Therefore, if the roads are not accessible, no matter how many orders they have on social media, the producer cannot deliver or collect payment for their prepared products.

When asked how they set their prices, many respond that they calculate them based on their costs, while others say it is a market price that ‘seems reasonable’ to them. This profit margin is often flexible, and it emerges as a challenge for the survival of the businesses. In this sense, if they know there is a regional gastronomic festival, either in their town or elsewhere, the final price may vary taking advantage of the opportunity to apply a higher profit margin to the product. Also, if they notice that they are not selling, and a significant part of the day has passed, they offer promotions or giveaways to sell and go home with as few products as possible, which mostly applies to fresh products that cannot be stored.

One of the issues that arises is the lack of financial training to determine a realistic and applicable profit margin. They know what it costs to make jam or sweets, but they are not very clear about what price they should sell them for. This is because most of the producers have not received training in this area. While local municipalities support them, they only provide training in food hygiene handling but do not teach how to apply profit to their products, reach the break-even point, or have a logical profit margin based on the investment made. On the other hand, when asked how they communicate these prices to the consumer, they respond that they do so orally. In some cases, there are signs with prices or chalkboards at the stalls in the fairs (Figure 1).



Figure 1. An example of a sweet product sales point

Source: Own Source

All of them charge for their products in Argentine pesos. Only four of the producers have *Mercado Pago*, a virtual mobile chip account in Argentina. This means that not all consumers, especially if they are international, have it, and they see it as an impediment if they do not have cash to pay at the time of purchase, which also hinders their participation in tourism-related activities. The clear example they give is that some tourists do not have the virtual account; therefore, they cannot accept payment through that means and cannot accept credit cards. They rely on visitors having Argentine pesos in their pockets. The producers do not have card readers or bank accounts. This means they are not part of the banking system. While it is a disadvantage, when asked about the reasons that prevent them from entering the banking system, they respond that the requirements are very difficult to meet, and the economic prerequisites are not accessible. Faced with so many barriers, they are excluded from sales opportunities. In this regard, the producers express the need for collaboration with both public administrations and the creation of synergies among producers. For example, sharing experiences regarding consumer acceptance and perception of the product, which would allow them to quantify the product's value in terms of its monetary price.

4.2. The challenges of food product marketing in rural areas

In relation to sales, as mentioned in the previous section, most of the producers have responded that they sell more through digital means than in person. The virtual sales process involves placing an order but not completing the sale itself. The actual sale takes place when the buyer has the product in hand and either pays in cash or uses *Mercado Pago*. Many fairs or markets are seen as sales opportunities, but when there is no physical commercial space, they use social media to reach buyers. Social media serves the purpose of promoting the product, announcing its availability, and allowing consumers to make inquiries directly to the producer through private messages or comments on a photo. When an order is placed, the producer prepares the product. If it is already prepared, they arrange a day, time, and place for delivery. If it needs to be produced, they make it to meet the consumer's demand, which is also an increasing value of the proximity between producers and consumers. Once both the producer and consumer are in the same place, the sale is completed through the channels mentioned above.

Only one producer mentioned not having labels; only label the jar with the flavour of the jam, some contact information, and nothing else. In contrast, the remaining 11 producers have their own brand name (Figure 2), colourful labels, batch numbers, expiration dates, and the address

where the jam was made, which is also required to raise awareness among consumers. They also specify the flavour and storage instructions. This is essential for the product's value and its purchase as a souvenir by tourists.

Most producers offer tastings at fairs or markets, serving jam or sweet with homemade bread to introduce consumers to their product. As part of the commercial exchange, which is informal, they mention that “we try to sell everything we produce every week. If we don't sell everything, we offer promotions to sell more”. In this sense, when producers notice a buyer's interest, they apply discounts when purchasing more than 2 jars, usually on the spot. In all cases, they mentioned that consumers recognise jams and sweets as typical gastronomic products of the Cuenca del Salado region in the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina.



Figure 2. An example of blackberry jam labelling

Source: Own Source

Furthermore, in all cases, the producers acknowledge that they face certain difficulties in running their own businesses. Among the most prominent issues mentioned is the high cost of input. This has a logical explanation, as Argentina's year-over-year inflation rate in 2022 was 94.8%. They also mention the lack of technical equipment, which prevents them from producing in larger quantities, although the more artisanal and homemade production technique is what adds value to these products. The flavour is more authentic than jams and sweets produced with industrial techniques, and the people who are in direct contact with the product, produce it and promote it, which has a direct impact on the authenticity chain from production

to consumption. The buyer or visitor who purchases the product does so from the hands of the person who made it, which connects with both the cultural landscape (the family tradition associated with the product's production) and the natural landscape (the origin of the fruits). This connects with the tourism attraction of the product.

The lack of financial capacity is another challenge they face. They struggle to save and have investment capacity. The Argentine economy is in crisis⁵, which does not allow them to invest more or expand. While they affirmed that “it is tough for us to continue with the current economic problem”, they also highlighted that the business is part of their identity, “we have been making sweets since we were children, and we do not know how to do anything else”, reported a producer. Most of them have expressed they also need to learn or improve production techniques, and the solution they mention is constant training and education, as seen in relation to pricing strategies. They find it challenging to determine if what they are charging for a sweet or jam really helps them make a profit. They also mention a lack of production skills and the need to learn or improve techniques, as well as a lack of sales skills.

Producers also notice that there is not a constant number of visitors in the region during the year. The most visitors they receive are during gastronomic festivals or popular festivals organised by municipal authorities, which implies a sense of tourist seasonality that does not allow them to integrate their production consistently into the tourism experience.

4.3. Towards greater tourism capacity?

The solutions they propose to overcome the difficulties mentioned in the productive sector include acquiring machinery and raw materials to promote growth, more training and education in both production and economic-financial matters. Many producers mentioned the lack of access to microloans. They would like public and private banks to offer personal or micro-enterprise loans. If there were the possibility of accessing bank loans, they could expand their production spaces or buy machinery to produce on a larger scale and participate in more fairs and markets, which they currently find difficult due to their low production volume.

⁵ The Argentine crisis of 2022 consisted of an economic collapse characterised by uncontrolled inflation, rising poverty and an economy that failed to provide growth, opportunities and quality of life for its citizens. According to INDEC (National Institute of Statistics and Censuses of the Argentine Republic, 2022), the annual inflation rate for 2022 was 94.8%. This economic situation also hindered the growth of rural food producers due to the nationwide economic stagnation.

Furthermore, all the interviewees express their interest in training. The topics that interest them the most include gaining knowledge about social media sales, administration and marketing, sales techniques, gastronomic production and preparation, accessing loans, and food hygiene courses.

In the context of tourism, they all agree to receive visitors at the production spaces when they are producing and sharing their food stories, but they see it as a distant idea because many of them do not have space to receive visitors. This is a common factor among small artisanal food producers who cannot adapt their resources and facilities for tourism purposes but do have a product that symbolises the territory, their identity, and positions based on cultural and natural values that have been passed down from generation to generation. They also protect and promote synergies among producers as a source of cooperation. “We are a community that supports each other, buying each other’s products”, a producer stated, and “I still believe that the local economy helps us. We are very small local producers and need to continue being so”. This should also be reflected in social media, where the narratives can engage users with the landscapes and lifestyles of the agricultural tradition (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The promotion of artisanal sweets on social media

Source: @donacatalina.ok

The producers stated that the accessibility to their territory is not adequate, and in other cases, they mention that they would like to have better amenities in their production sites. When asked about the meaning of *better amenities*, they express a desire to have a restroom for visitors, better-decorated housing infrastructure, and more spacious areas. If they receive visitors without these renovations, they will have to welcome them in the living rooms of their homes, which they find small. The producers would be willing to receive visitors, if possible, on weekends. During the week, visits to the region are scarce since gastronomic events and fairs are typically held on Saturdays or Sundays. Due to the proximity to the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, visitors come to the region on weekends for excursions, and both Saturday and Sunday are the days that the local government chooses for planning fairs and festivals, which is at the moment the main point of contact to materialise the process of awarding tourism value to the sweets they elaborate. During the interviews they also showed appreciation towards the food events which primarily allow them to sell the sweet products.

In the relationship between the production and consumption of sweet products, the producers also supply local restaurants and bars. Restaurants use their sweets to create desserts and include them on their menus. For instance, the San Francisco store in Roque Pérez offers candied squash as a dessert. The squash plantation is located in the area, and the cook also makes the sweet. Most producers mention that these restaurants promote their products by stating on their menus that the ingredients are local, from ‘kilometre zero’ products. However, they acknowledge that they compete with industrial jams and sweets available in neighbourhood markets at a lower price. Still, they also know that consumers can differentiate the taste of their products. Most of their customers are Argentine, either from the region or visitors from the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires who take advantage of excursions and purchase their gastronomic products as souvenirs.

Half of the producers believe that increased support from the public sector for food producers is necessary. Nevertheless, they all support the tourism development of the region, considering it an opportunity for potential customers to visit and for their products to sell better. They emphasise that it is a good way to keep their culture alive and make themselves known as a tourist region. Tourism development would benefit the producers by generating more employment. They also mention that tourism development improves their economy and quality of life, and it contributes to the economic, environmental, and social wellbeing of the area.

They all express an unanimously positive opinion about how tourism is developing in this region by the local authorities. They all believe it is important for the local population to be

involved in decisions related to tourism planning and development. The reasons they mention include the impact on the regional economy, the ability to make proposals to public actors, the opportunity to contribute ideas for further development, and the feeling of being heard and integrated. Of all the producers, 7 of them feel that they did not have the opportunity to influence the decisions made regarding the tourism sector in this region, while 5 of them mention that their opinions were considered.

For example, ‘La noche de los almacenes’ (The night of the general stores), in Roque Pérez, is held on the first Saturday of January each year. In 2022, all four Saturdays were rainy, making it impossible to hold the event. The producers were consulted by the Director of Tourism because the production of gastronomic products for the event depended on them. Knowing how the weather was shaping up, they themselves proposed holding it in another month to avoid wasting raw materials and resources if the festival was not beneficial. Therefore, it took place in February, as the producers suggested. In Tapalqué, the pools were built, and when showing the site plan to the residents, the producers were consulted about where they thought the food stalls should be located. To this day, the stalls are where the producers advised. Everyone agrees that the local government should lead the process of tourism development in the region. The government must carry out strategic planning as an instrument of tourism development. Argentina needs to be at the forefront of new strategies and trends in food tourism to adapt to its cyclical crises.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The present article analyses the role of sweet products in the development of rural areas and the relationship between food and tourism as a territorial development activity based on sweet products. It also provides a novel perspective on the intersection of agriculture, food, and tourism based on the role of sweet production to the diversification and sustainability of regional tourism economies (see, for example, Bernardo & Rodrigues, 2020).

This paper argues that sweet products can engage producers with tourism and contribute to the revitalization of rural areas, attracting a new wave of visitors interested in discovering the region through the people, places, and practices embedded in local food production (Magri-Harsich et al., 2024). As indicated by Navarro and Schlüter (2010), food is a tangible good that can not only be consumed but it carries with it a cultural and social value, becoming a fundamental element in the heritage and traditions of people (Espeitx, 2004). It transcends its

mere value as a commodity to acquire significance linked to a mode of expression of the tradition of people (Nemes et al. 2023), as is the case with *dulce de leche*. This research understands the gastronomic activity of artisanal sweet and jam production as a profitable income source that regulates family economies in rural areas and analyses its tourism value from the perspective of the producers.

Previous research identifies a motivational interest for visitors who want to engage in food tourism (see Dixit, 2019; Fusté-Forné and Wolf, 2023), which, through sweets, allows them to experience the life of the community and make direct purchases, for example, souvenirs. The importance of this research lies in the understanding of an artisanal gastronomic activity in a very challenging social and economic context in the Republic of Argentina, where producers have not given up. This region is comprised of six municipalities that do not share the same political affiliation. However, it is worth highlighting the community's work on collective interests over individual ones to establish themselves as a food tourism region (see Everett and Slocum, 2013; Mei et al., 2017). The work of the tourism boards is noteworthy, as they prioritise the region's tourism growth, for example, through the organisation of gastronomic festivals and fairs.

Results of this research demonstrate that the activity carried out with their own fruit trees, using local products, and the seasonality of raw materials, has provided jam producers with profitability that allows them to find employment and support their families. Each producer, with municipal support, manages to establish themselves in local and popular fairs to facilitate the sale of their products. This contributes to the planning and development of food tourism based on sweet products, which shows the value chain of the product from farm to table (Figure 4). Results of the paper also show the challenges that embrace the product and marketing strategies of the producers.

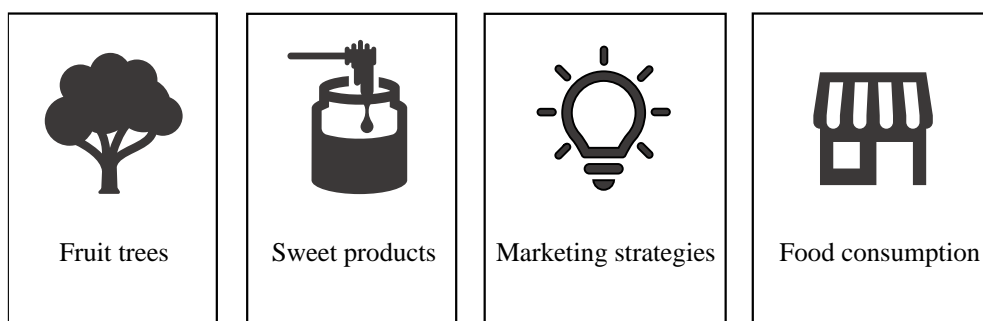


Figure 4. The value chain of sweet products in food tourism

Source: Own Elaboration

In addition, sweet producers have managed to provide the Campos, Ríos y Lagunas region with a heritage authenticity through a distinctive product. For example, the alfajores (a type of sweet confection) of Saladillo and Tapalqué are characteristic of the region (see, also, Shahrin and Hussin, 2023). Those familiar with Argentine alfajores and their many varieties understand that the type of filling, coating, and dough often reflects a specific region, province, or locality. In this case, the association arises because the *dulce de leche* used in their preparation is a traditional sweet produced in the interior of Buenos Aires Province. Specifically, it is made in a nearby town called Cañuelas, serving as an example of a local “kilometre zero” food product.

Jams also play a prominent role, respecting the seasonality of fruit trees, pesticide-free production, and using citrus fruits typical of the region. Local markets are the spaces for sales and interaction that producers have with customers. In these markets, gastronomic festivals, or popular fairs, as examples of food tourism, interaction is achieved, where each customer can not only make purchases but also exchange ideas and make inquiries about production and direct questions with their producer (Ingrassia et al. 2023). It is a short circuit where intermediaries do not exist. The jam or alfajor goes directly from the producer to the consumer. This makes the costs for the customer more affordable. According to Schlüter and Thiel Ellul (2008), this type of tourism is often linked to festivals or events specific to each region (Kim and Iwashita, 2016), which is an attractive element for food tourists (Kovalenko et al. 2023), as they can not only taste the region’s typical products but also experience the celebrations, culinary customs, and cultural traditions of the place they visit (Dias et al., 2023).

The cuisine of the region blends with the typical landscapes of the Buenos Aires province. Vast green fields with crops, cows, and goats. The arrival in the region is through National Route 205, and once you leave the Ezeiza-Cañuelas highway, the scenery conveys this nature scenery. This experience allows visitors to immerse themselves in a scenario from 40 years ago. A region that lacks tall buildings, modern constructions, or fully paved streets. Where train stations have ceased to function because the train no longer passes through there. In some cases, the railway buildings are used as museums, while others serve as municipal offices. This is an experience that must also address the challenges of accessibility to develop a food tourism system that enhances the tourism value of sweets. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the resilience and determination of the producers. Despite operating in an inflationary country with an increasing poverty rate, they persist. Society continues to strive forward, with collective work serving as a core principle for producers.

The analysis of sweet products in the context of food tourism also reveals a dynamic relation between cultural and economic logics (Hall & Gössling, 2016; Lejavitzer et al., 2022). From an economic perspective, sweet products contribute to the regional development of local economies (Rachão et al., 2019). They also contribute to value creation from production to consumption (Sims, 2010). However, the cultural perspective highlights the role of sweet products in local heritage and traditions, and everyday practices (Giampiccoli & Kalis, 2012). In this sense, sweet products are also part of the identity of local communities. This paper shows that the two perspectives coexist in tension and need critical analysis on how and why they are produced and experienced in food tourism in rural areas.

5.1. Theoretical and practical implications

This article recognizes food as a local heritage that fosters a sense of belonging to a region or locality through sweet products. It highlights and values rural recipes while promoting territorial and local development, particularly on a community level, from the perspective of the producers. As indicated in the theoretical framework, food tourism is an activity that contributes to the development of local and rural communities. In the Campos, Ríos y Lagunas region, this research demonstrates the utility of heritage gastronomy, traditional knowledge, and the revaluation of local foods. While this field has been studied in many parts of the world, there is no precedent for research in the Cuenca del Salado region, in Buenos Aires. There are no studies that have investigated the local production of food and its participation in tourism planning and development, where producers work collaboratively and cooperatively. Furthermore, the study is a contribution to the development of food tourism through the valorisation of sweets as an agricultural product.

Moreover, this research provides an academic study base for local governments, where tourism directors can bring the needs of producers to the negotiation table. The paper contributes to the tourism sector based on the role of local sweets in tourism planning and development strategies, which can also include public-private partnerships to enhance product branding. The importance of this study is a tool for municipalities, as it also introduces the topic that is currently not well-documented. It offers local managers useful knowledge about the types of sweet products produced in the region, who the producers are, and how they are organised. For local producers, it provides a tool to understand what they could improve or propose to the local and provincial government. It also offers them knowledge about their way of organising to

continue building this network that empowers the region. The paper has implications for tourism practitioners and policymakers who seek innovative ways to enhance rural tourism experiences and drive regional economic development through food.

5.2. Limitations and future research

The main limitation of this research lies in the ability to gain a deeper understanding of the production sites. The kitchens of rural homes are often basic and rustic, and in many cases, some producers are embarrassed to have them visited internally. It is even more challenging to document them with images. In several cases, during the interviews, they would set up a table on the sidewalk, display their products, and discuss the preparation methods, recipes from grandmothers and mothers. Some of them answered the interview with some fear because, in some cases, as they are not part of a bank system, they felt that the researcher could be a government inspector. This limitation could provide opportunities for future research if greater trust could be established to investigate tangible and intangible heritages that have not been observed within the kitchen at the moment. In addition, the study sample can introduce bias derived from the subjective perspectives of the participants. While the paper discusses a contextualised analysis of the role of sweet products in food tourism, based on the case of rural Argentina, the sample limits the generalisability of the results.

This opens avenues for future academic work that includes all artisanal products and allows for comparative studies between regions. Moreover, future studies could explore the experiences of visitors, their satisfaction, and their behaviour in rural areas to analyse visitor perspectives on economic, environmental and social impacts of sweet-based food tourism in rural areas. As a result, future research could investigate the role of the government in tourism policies in each locality or region as perceived by visitors. It could also explore the impact that officials have, from their own perspective, on food producers. The research could also be expanded geographically to neighbouring municipalities and include data on demographic and economic indicators. This would provide a more robust picture of the challenges and opportunities to develop the relationships between sweet products and food tourism.

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