

Regional foods in the tourism value chain: the case of Hazelnut of Brunyola

Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the participation of a local product in the tourism value chain, from the supply perspective. Based on a qualitative case study, interviews were carried out with hazelnut producers from Brunyola, in Girona, north-eastern Catalonia. The results showed the influences of internal and external factors, such as climate change, on the present and future conditions of the value chain in the context of food tourism management and marketing. Stronger collaboration between public and private stakeholders would help the producers face the challenges of the transforming hazelnuts, and the region, into a tourist attraction.

Keywords

Climate change • food tourism • regional development • tourism marketing

Ester Noguer-Junca¹
Francesc Fusté-Forné²

¹Department of Economics, University of Girona,
Girona, Catalonia, Spain
e-mail: ester.noguerjunca@udg.edu

²Department of Business, University of Girona,
Girona, Catalonia, Spain
e-mail: francesc.fusteforne@udg.edu

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Introduction and theoretical framework

During the last few decades, many studies have analysed the role of local foods in tourism planning and development (see, for example, Sims 2009). Local products and culinary traditions encapsulate the dynamics of production and consumption, which are manifested in the cultural and natural heritage of the location (Berno & Fusté-Forné 2020; Miele & Murdoch 2022). Local foods illustrate a 'sense of place' (Bessièrre 2013; Timothy 2015) as a unique attribute of the destination. At the same time, the presence of local products is an added value to the tourism experience, and enhances the physical and symbolic relationship with visited places (Ginés-Ariza et al. 2022). In this sense, this paper aims to investigate the participation of local products in the tourism value chain from a supply perspective.

While food can act as both the main reason to visit a place and as a complimentary motivation (Flavián & Fandos 2011; McKercher 2020), during the last few decades, it has emerged as a path towards protecting and promoting the uniqueness of people, places, and practices, increasingly framed within the context of slow food tourism (Fusté-Forné & Jamal 2020). Previous research has acknowledged the relevance of local products in tourism systems and, in particular, as a key element in the touristic experience (Ellis et al. 2018; Haider & Shoab 2020; Hashemi et al. 2021; Hossany et al. 2022). This is especially relevant in rural areas (Figueiredo 2021; Fusté-Forné & Mundet 2021). A local food not only improves the singularity of the touristic experience (Filipiak-Florkiewicz et al. 2022), but it also increases the attractiveness of the destination (Lopez-Guzmán et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2021), thus contributing to the development of rural areas (Fusté-Forné 2022; Omar et al. 2020).

At the same time, interest in consuming locally-based products is increasing in the context of slow food movements (Paciarotti & Torregiani 2018). In this sense, the use of short food supply chains is crucial to providing added value through a direct relationship between producers and consumers (Mardsen et al. 2000; Todorovic et al. 2018). These short food supply chains valorise the uniqueness of the locations (Reina-Usuga 2023) and promote a positive environmental and socioeconomic impact

on regional development. There are various factors which drive consumers to prefer slow food supply chains, such as freshness, healthiness, and quality (Bavorova et al. 2016; Polimeni et al. 2018), but also to support local economies (Wang et al. 2021). However, previous studies have mentioned that labelling and price are potential barriers (González-Azcárate et al. 2021; Qi et al. 2017), as is inadequate access to the product and the information about it (Cembalo et al. 2015; González-Azcárate et al. 2021). While the planning and development of slow food supply chains is a source of competitive advantage (Tiganis 2023), a lot of local products remain invisible in this very competitive environment.

Recent studies have demonstrated the relevance of local food to the future of sustainable tourism (Okumus 2020; Fountain 2021) in the context of tourism policies, which are increasingly interested in the use of local foods as resources for tourism (Handsuh 2003; UNWTO 2012). In this sense, recent research has urged food tourism academics and practitioners to explore local foods as part of the future of tourism from the perspective of production (Noguer-Junca et al. 2021) within the current context dominated by the uncertainty induced by climate change (Fusté-Forné & Jamal 2020) and geopolitical crises (Lee et al. 2021).

This paper aims to analyse the tourism value chain of local food products based on the case of hazelnuts and the perspective of local producers, with the objective of identifying challenges and opportunities for the future of food tourism. A process which contributes to the close connections between production and consumption (Star et al. 2020) is the awarding of tourism value to local food, relying heavily on the territorial identity of the products (Bessièrre 1998; Rachão et al. 2019), which, as a practice, informs the sustainable development of food tourism. While the tourism value chain has recently been investigated in relation to local food in rural areas (see Slocum 2015), there is a research gap in relation to specific niche forms of food tourism (see Fusté-Forné 2022). In this context the authors have identified a potential research agenda focused on hazelnuts.

Previous research has scarcely analysed hazelnuts from a social sciences perspective. Pourramzan (2022) studied the influences of hazelnut production on rural development (see also Franco et al. 2012), while only Büyüksalvarci and Akkaya have focused on the role of hazelnuts in tourism, based on food festivals in Turkey. Hazelnuts are a crucial ingredient in the Mediterranean diet (Ros 2020; UNESCO 2022), and Spain emerges as a relevant example for analysis as it is one of the main global producers of hazelnuts (FAO 2022). The production of Spanish hazelnuts is highly concentrated in Catalonia, which produces 91% of the total Spanish production (Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación 2022). Also, the hazelnuts produced in Catalonia are recognised globally for their quality and they have an important role in food exports (PRODECA 2022). While the hazelnuts from Reus, in the region of Tarragona, are the most important type of hazelnut in terms of production and consumption, there are other areas which are also part of the hazelnut landscape of rural Catalonia. This paper, which is exploratory in nature, specifically focuses on the case of the Brunyola hazelnut, from Girona, north-eastern Catalonia, which is a territory with a large agricultural production and strong connections between local food and tourism (see Ginés-Ariza et al. 2022).

Following the above introduction to, and contextualization of, the research objective, the paper consists of a materials and methods section, a results and discussion section, and the conclusion.

Materials and methods

The aim of this paper is to analyse the participation of a local product in the tourism value chain and to analyse how internal and external factors, such as climate change, might shape and influence this value chain in the context of food tourism management and marketing.

Study area

Brunyola hazelnut production is carried out in the northeast of Catalonia, in eight municipalities in the county of La Selva, and two municipalities in the county of Gironès in the province of Girona. Specifically, the production area is concentrated in Amer, Anglès, Bescanó, Bonmatí, Brunyola, La Cellera de Ter, Sant Julià de Llor, Santa Coloma de Farners, Vilablareix, and Vilobí d'Onyar. More than half the production is located in Brunyola (see Figure 1), a municipality which is 36.61 km² and has 390 inhabitants, which gives the brand its name. The main tourist attractions of the area are the natural environment, which is part of the rural countryside, and the cultural heritage, along with a castle and the church of Sant Fruitós de Brunyola. The area's accommodation offer is limited to three rural lodges and one holiday camp, making a total capacity of 132 people. Tourism activity in the region is still underdeveloped and valorising the hazelnut could be an opportunity for planning and developing sustainable food tourism.

In 2016, with the aim of protecting the knowledge concerning the local hazelnut and promoting the commercialization of the product, various producers created the association *Avellana de Brunyola i Comarques Gironines*. In addition, in 2018, five of the producers decided to create the Esclovellana company, which was given the commercial name *Nuasets*, in order to consolidate the hazelnuts' production and its marketing. They first rented a space in Food Lab, an industrial gastronomic innovation centre in the municipality of Riudellots de la Selva, but then, in 2022, created their own workshop in the house of one of the company's shareholders.

Study method

The need to adopt an exploratory approach led the researchers to use a qualitative design in order to capture in-



Figure 1. Hazelnut trees in Brunyola photo taken by Ester Noguer-Juncà

depth details about the phenomena being studied (Bryman 2015), and to be able to analyse the situation from a local perspective (Mey 2022). That is, the qualitative approach is appropriate for gathering the perspectives of local stakeholders. In this sense, the credibility and validity of this qualitative research are achieved through the description of the discussions held with the interviewees (Tracy 2010). These are analysed in the next section. Using a non-probabilistic sample, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with all Nuasets' producers and shareholders (Table 1). While the analysis is limited to the supply side, the field work includes interviews with all the producers and shareholders. The interview guide emerged from existing academic literature about the role of local food products in tourism value chains in rural areas, in which issues like the protection and promotion of identity have been analysed together with the challenges for agricultural areas caused by climate change. Also, the researchers supplemented the interviews with a visit to the Nuasets workshop and the production area, which allowed them to further understand the environment of the production area and illustrate the results.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first researcher during the month of October 2022. The interviews were carried out using virtual platforms according to the availability of the participants, and they were recorded for further analysis. Each of the interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes and all of them were carried out in Catalan. After data collection, the interviews were transcribed. The analysis was also carried out in Catalan and the quotations presented in the results have been translated from the original language into English. A thematic analysis was conducted (Marks & Yardley 2004) as part of the analysis of the interviewees' responses. Specifically, the results of the interviews were based on four thematic categories: (1) the past, present, and future of production; (2) the link between the hazelnut and the region; (3) the marketing strategy; and (4) the role of stakeholders in relation to the transformation of the hazelnut into a tourist attraction.

Results

The results are presented and detailed below, organised into four sections according to the thematic categories identified in the data analysis.

The past, present, and future of production

According to the producers, hazelnuts have been a subsistence product in the area for many years. Also, the

Table 1. Interviewees' profiles (authors' compilation)

Interviewee	Municipality	Education	Years of experience	Age	Gender
I1	Sant Martí Sapresa	Bachelor's degree	+10 years	35 years	Female
I2	Brunyola	Professional training	+20 years	40 years	Male
I3	Brunyola	Professional training	+30 years	50 years	Female
I4	Estanyol	Bachelor's degree	+30 years	50 years	Male
I5	Brunyola	Basic education	+40 years	60 years	Male

Source: own elaboration

tradition of hazelnut production is linked to the work of previous generations, as I1 confirmed:

'...my grandfather already had hazelnuts'. (I1)

While hazelnuts have been part of rural entrepreneurship for decades, the producers stated that productivity was not very high:

'...each producer has from 9 to 11 hectares; that is, from 9 to 11 tonnes – a tonne per hectare'. (I3)

The production area is small; however, the producers explained that the cultivation process has improved considerably due to mechanization, as I4 pointed out:

'...first, hazelnuts were picked by hand. After, we used vacuum harvester machines, and nowadays we use more developed equipment that allow us to reduce human resource costs and to improve the quality of the hazelnuts, because 60% are picked directly from the tree and, consequently, they spend less time on the ground and they are less affected by humidity'. (I4)

Also, some producers mentioned that the improvement was also because there had been a change in the location of the hazelnut trees:

'My grandparents had some hazelnut trees next to the river where nothing else would grow, but nowadays we cultivate on the plains'. (I2)

All the interviewees considered that the main challenge they face nowadays and in the near future was due to the impact of climate change. In particular, I5 mentioned that

'...the increase in temperatures means that the fruit falls before it ripens, and the fruit is not of good quality'. (I5)

This preoccupation with climate was also expressed by I3, who explained that

'...nowadays, there are no regular rains. Some years ago there were, like, three or four days of eastern rains, and we could use this water...but last year [2021] it did not rain from April to September; and this year [2022], from April there hasn't been any rain. This has caused the crops to become infested by *Halyomorpha halys*, an Asian insect that damages the fruit'. (I3)

Along similar lines, I1 mentioned that 'the temperatures [occurring] at the wrong time affect the tree and also the fruit' (I1). And I4 stated that

'...the lack of cold temperatures means that there is not much pollen, and so the fertilization is poor. Also, the hazelnut trees need a lot of shade, and we have to use sunscreens for the trees'. (I4)

In relation to the future of the hazelnut, most of the producers mentioned that they were afraid that production would not be maintained in the long term because there is no generational shift, and this is because the product is highly dependent on the weather and it requires expensive but poorly paid labour. I1 reported that

'...the scenario is quite dark, quite black. There are no incentives for young farmers, not only for hazelnut production but for the whole [of] agriculture'. (I1)

I2 explained that

'...to live from the cultivation of hazelnuts is impossible. You must make an investment – for at least five to seven years you will not get an economic return, and this only if everything goes well'. (I2)

This is also exacerbated because of the prices, both of the products sold to consumers, and of the production:

'...my father created a drip irrigation system, and the water falls directly to the root, it does not evaporate ... we have to use this system in summer during the night because the water and the electricity costs are cheaper, especially during the last year'. (I2)

'...there are no young people because they do not earn [enough of] a living ... the price paid to producers is decreasing and the prices of equipment, gas, and electricity are increasing'. (I3)

It is worth mentioning that I4 considered that if Nuasets became a well-known brand – in line with, for example, the development of a tourist attraction (see Figure 2) – it could positively affect the future of production. Specifically, I4 pointed out: 'I think that Nuasets could be a good strategy to overcome the current situation'.

The link between the hazelnut and the region

All producers agreed that the Brunyola hazelnut was well-known in the local area of production but was not known at the national or international level. Even at the Catalan level, the best known hazelnuts are the ones produced in Reus, in the province of Tarragona (south of Catalonia), which counts on a Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and where the majority of the hazelnut stakeholders are located. This idea is explained by interviewee I1 who said:

‘...at [the] local level – I mean in Girona and its surroundings – the Brunyola hazelnut is known, but outside of here, the most famous one is that of Tarragona. It makes sense because they have the toasting and packing industry ...’ (I1)

The producers indicated that one of the main problems was the lack of consumer awareness about the health and nutritional properties of hazelnuts. This was highlighted by, for example, interviewees I2 and I3, who pointed out that

‘...people know that [the] hazelnut is an ingredient of chocolate-based products, such as the famous Ferrero Rocher and Nutella, and a lot of education is needed’. (I2)

‘...there is not a lot of awareness. People know what a nut with chocolate is, and nothing else’. (I3)

In the same vein, I4 mentioned that

‘...it is very important to explain to society that we have the product here, that it is not necessary to go to Turkey to have a good quality hazelnut’. (I4)

It is also important to strengthen the connections between the product and the region, which is also part of the name of the hazelnut, ‘the Brunyola hazelnut’; and this is also relevant to the commercialization and promotion of the product as explained in the next section.

The marketing strategy

The interviewees explained that before they created Nuasetts they used to sell the whole harvest to intermediaries, whose toasting and packaging infrastructure was in Tarragona, because the producers in the Brunyola area did not carry out the processing of the product (see the raw product in Figure 3). As I3 explained:

‘...we sold the harvest to intermediaries like Frit Ravich or some cooperatives of Tarragona. We could not sell directly to the final customer because we did not toast the hazelnut[s]’. (I3)

However, since the creation of the Nuasetts brand, they have been able to sell the product directly to pastry shops, gourmet stores, and small intermediary organizations. That is, they still do not sell directly to final customers, but they have changed the profile of intermediaries to a more local-based supply chain where they have more control of the distribution of the product. In this sense, it is important to note that the producers have some idea about who the final customers are. This also depends on producers; for example, it is worth mentioning that one of the producers (I5) reported that

‘...we are shareholders of Nuasetts but, at the same time, we are also intermediaries; we buy hazelnuts from the small producers here in Brunyola and its surroundings and we sell them to larger companies in Tarragona to commercialise’. (I5)

The interviewees agreed that the commercialization of Nuasetts (see, for example, Figure 4) was still difficult due to the lack of economic resources, which is also linked to the problems explained in the previous sections. I2 mentioned that

‘...we sell hazelnuts to local shops and other places that we can reach for ourselves. Fortunately, we have a



Figure 2. A sign welcomes visitors to Nuasetts photo taken by Ester Noguer-Juncà



Figure 3. Hazelnuts sorted at the producers' facilities photo taken by Ester Noguer-Juncà

client in Barcelona who sells our products to important pastry chefs, like Sauleda, and an intermediary in Empordà who sells our products on the Costa Brava’. (I2)

In addition, according to the interviewees, they need to invest in online promotion, but they do not have enough time because of the small size of the association. I4 stated that

‘...we know that we are not up to date. We are on Instagram, but we do not have time for anything else. We need an online shop, but we don't have time’. (I4)

However, the producers also explained about the various promotional activities they are doing, such as guided tours and cooperation with other associations – which have been successful. As I4 explained:

‘...the guided tours and organising tastings with PDO Empordà wines are very good for us’. (I4)

In addition, the interviewees highlighted the relevance of the fact that mass communication media reported on information about the Brunyola hazelnut (see Televisió de Catalunya 2022), which is relevant to gaining popularity in Catalonia. Finally,



Figure 4. Packaged hazelnut-based products
photo taken by Ester Noguer-Juncà

the interviewees considered that the Brunyola hazelnut fair, which takes place every year on the first weekend of October, contributes significantly to promoting the product at local and regional levels, as evidenced by I2:

'...people come from all over Catalonia, and they can taste and buy the product ... the fair gives us visibility'. (I2)

However, a stronger collaboration with public administration is required to expand the socioeconomic impact of the event. In this sense, I4 stated that

'...it is true that there is a lack of promotion, but it would be necessary [to have] the collaboration of the local population to create a unique experience'. (I4)

The role of the stakeholders in relation to the transformation of hazelnuts into a tourism attraction

As highlighted in the previous section, there is little cooperation among stakeholders, especially from a public-private perspective. For some interviewees, this was due to the producers themselves not being keen on cooperating, while for others it was because of a lack of interest by other, private businesses:

'...the restaurants don't do anything because we haven't offered them [anything]...' (I2)

'...once we offered to collaborate with restaurants on an awareness campaign, but they said no...' (I3)

If there is no solid project on which the stakeholders can cooperate, for example producers and restaurants, it is difficult to engage them – considering that each segment of the value chain has its own interests, and each segments' business also responds to its own business performance. It is obvious that a lack of cooperation among stakeholders in the tourism value chain and a lack of promotion are the two main barriers which prevent the Brunyola hazelnut from becoming a food tourism attraction which relies on the local identity.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that collaboration with public administration is also important. From the producers point of view, the main problem is that the bureaucracy implied in the relationships between the producers and public administration is

the same for small producers as it is for big companies. I4 pointed out that

'...it is clear that they have to control the quality of the products because it is a public health issue, but perhaps we do not need to have the same requirements as a larger industry... perhaps in our case a waste management plan, for example, is not necessary'. (I4)

At the same time, the producers asked for help from public administration to control pests and also to reverse the negative effects caused by the increase in costs of basic products. I2 affirmed that 'there is no need for grants, but price control', in a context where, in addition to the challenges posed by climate change, the current global situation provides a sense of uncertainty for local producers all over the planet.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper is based on the value of local food as a way to protect and promote local identity and heritage, and as a source of tourism attraction. In particular, this exploratory study contributes to the food tourism conversation which has taken place in recent years from the perspective of the role of producers in the relationship between agriculture and tourism, where agriculture is a source for the planning and development of tourism (Bemo et al. 2014). Previous studies have demonstrated that the relationships between local food and tourism contribute to the competitiveness of destinations based on 'the processes, contexts, and meanings associated with the production, harvesting, processing, cooking, serving, and consumption of food' (Knollenberg et al. 2021, p.380). That is, food has become a key element in developing slow food tourism (Fusté-Forné & Jamal 2020) based on the use of short food supply chains (Todorovic et al. 2018), which is especially relevant in rural areas (Figueiredo 2021; Fusté-Forné & Mundet 2021). These relationships have been analysed in this paper using the case of the Brunyola hazelnut.

The results of the study revealed that the connections between food and tourism, based on the Brunyola hazelnut, are still in the preliminary stages. While Brunyola hosts a hazelnut festival every year, the researchers observed that this remains local. Producers should develop a larger range of marketing tactics, and social media should also become a crucial tool for protecting and promoting rural entrepreneurship (Morris & James 2017) in the context of agricultural marketing (Balkrishna & Deshmukh 2017).

The results showed that the link between the hazelnut and the region is a lost opportunity for the producers and other stakeholders, such as restaurants, to plan and develop a narrative based on the cultural and environmental identity of the region. This would help to increase the relevance of the product and also visitor awareness. As the participants explained, people do not know the health and nutritional benefits of hazelnuts, and this requires a local narrative which would also require collaboration among food stakeholders (see Boesen et al. 2017; Noguer-Juncà et al. 2021).

The results also indicated that it is evident that climate change is one of the main challenges which future food tourism will face, because it not only affects the quality of the products and the economic costs of producing them, but also the use of local foods as resources for tourism (see also Ellis et al. 2018). Added to the crucial role that policies will play in managing the climate threats, this paper has also identified other challenges in relation to the transformation of the hazelnut into a tourism attraction, where inter-sectorial relationships are crucial for encouraging sustainable tourism development (Thomas-Francois et al. 2017). This paper also demonstrates that food is a representation of place (Bessière 2013; Timothy 2015); and, hand in hand with public and private stakeholders, the symbiosis between 'hazelnuts'

and 'Brunyola' could lead to the communication of not only the brand of the town, but also the brand of the region due to the increasing interest in slow food supply chains and slow food tourism experiences.

Theoretical and practical implications

From a theoretical perspective, this paper contributes to the literature concerned with the understanding that the development of local food tourism experience is an essential partner for the agricultural sector. Rural areas must protect and promote local food and beverages as resources for tourism to ensure the economic, environmental and sociocultural continuity of their communities. This paper has contributed to the original question regarding the participation of a local product in the tourism value chain from a supply perspective. It informs the recent research on short food supply chains about the challenges and opportunities observed by producers, and it also expands the studies which have analysed the relationships between food and tourism. The research has also anticipated future research trends in agricultural marketing and food tourism, where the role of climate change and the cost of production impact on the features of the production and also determine the participation of local food in a competitive market.

This research also has practical implications. One of these is a call to action for the local stakeholders who participate in the value chain (producers, distributors, restaurants, and other tourism actors) to collaborate in order to protect the hazelnut as part of the identity of Brunyola, and promote it as a food tourism attraction for the region. It is evident that despite the bottom-up process of the valorisation of local food products, the participation of public administration is necessary to help the producers confront the internal and external challenges faced by local producers. The results suggest that the public sector must

develop a marketing strategy to guarantee the protection and the promotion of the hazelnut as part of the intangible heritage of Brunyola and its surroundings, to define the Brunyola hazelnut as iconic and a symbol of the territory, and to create strategies based on this product which differentiate it from others.


Limitations and future research

This paper is based on the case of the Brunyola hazelnut, and its results are limited to a descriptive and exploratory qualitative analysis. This limits the conclusions of the research, however, it presents a case which is representative of family and rural entrepreneurship in the Catalan and Spanish countryside, and is based on the hazelnut as a way of illustrating the role of a local product in the tourism value chain. Therefore, it would be interesting to compare the results with other Spanish and European regions which are characterised by hazelnut production to have a national and international comparison. Also, interviewees in this research were exclusively the producers and founders of Nuasets.

Future research could analyse the points of view of other private and public stakeholders, such as restaurants and local government, to study the planning and development and marketing of hazelnuts as a future food-tourism attraction for the region, and, hence, to reach a holistic analysis from the supply perspective. It would also be interesting to analyse the visitor profile and the tourist demand in relation to this traditional product and, consequently, provide a more robust understanding of the relationships between food and the tourist's experience.

ORCID

Ester Noguer-Junca  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5977-0005>

Francesc Fusté-Forné  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3800-9284>

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