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From commercial to cultural: the role of the festival “Firatast - Una fira boníssima” in the promotion and appreciation of Catalan cuisine

Abstract:

The article presents a study on the profile of the visiting public to the 23^a *Firatast Una fira boníssima* and perceptions regarding its organization, and the gastronomic and cultural elements presented during the event. The methodology employed is both qualitative and quantitative, using direct observation, survey questionnaire scripts with 119 participants, and in-depth interviews with the festival’s managers. The highlight of this research is to have identified that, although originally created for commercial purposes, the festival has gradually turned into a cultural event and is now perceived by its public as a tool for enhancing and promoting the techniques and traditions of Catalan cuisine.

Keywords – Girona; Food heritage; Culinary festival; Food festival; Gastronomy promotion.

Introduction

In recent years, the gastronomy sector has demonstrated many possibilities for developing food heritage, one being increasing the number of gastronomy festivals, as they can have a wide variety of aims (cultural, recreational, commercial, among others).

The literature suggests that festivals or events enjoy fundamental advantages for destinations based around opportunities for economic growth by giving new life to existing companies, developing new businesses and also generating revenue for governments (Dwyer, Forsyth, & Spurr, 2005; Huang, Li, & Cai, 2010). Events also allow destinations to differentiate themselves from other places, helping to create the destination image and brand (Allen, O'Toole, McDonnell, Harris, 2008; Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Getz, 2000; Hall, Sharples, Mitchell, Macionis, & Cambourne, 2003; Hall & Sharples, 2008).

Food-related events present opportunities to promote culinary products and increase the attractiveness of the destination (Getz, 2000). Food is increasingly recognized as an important factor for the cultural tourism market and of particular interest for the development of rural regions (Bessière, 1998; Boniface, 2003; Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Hall & Mitchell, 2000; Hjalager & Richards, 2002).

Rusher (2003) stated that in the postmodern age festivals and events have provided an effective means for communities to assert their values and cultural and regional identities. Moreover, cuisine can be one of the most important cultural expressions (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Poulain, 2007, 2013; Rand & Heath, 2006). Therefore, food is a key element in cultural consumption when eating habits translate into value.

Gastronomy festivals have elements of both traditional cuisine and gastronomic innovation at the same time, in many cases becoming a strategic tool to present and promote the territory, as well as communication and relationships between producers, distributors and

consumers. One might say that creative event projects are those that address the need for the territory's integral development (Rusher, 2003).

Cerezuela (2005) and Crompton and McKay (1997) presented three reasons why it is important to study the visitor profile of a gastronomic festival: first, as a key tool in the design of products and services aimed at customers; second, to achieve customer satisfaction; and finally, to improve understanding of the customer's decision-making process.

Some research aimed at determining visitors' perceptions of food festivals can be found in the literature, including the following studies: one aimed at identifying participants' benefits from visiting a food festival (Meretse, Mykletun, & Einarsen, 2015); one on visitor perceptions of local foods (Mgonja, K. F. Backman, Backman, Moore, & Hallo, 2016); on visitor motivations (Chang & Yuan, 2001; Park, Reisinger, & Kang, 2008); visitor satisfaction (Y. H. Kim, Kim, Goh, & Antun, 2011; Kim, Suh, & Eves, 2010); behavioral intentions (Horng, Su, & So, 2013; Wu, Wong, & Cheng, 2014); and a measurement scale for food festival visitor experience (Ding & Hoffer, 2017).

Thus, this research has the general objective of identifying the profile of the visiting public to the 23rd *Firatast - Una fira boníssima* and their perceptions regarding its organization and gastronomic and cultural elements presented throughout the festival. To this end, the specific objectives are as follows: to characterize visitors' socioeconomic profiles; identify consumer behaviors; determine motivations for participating in the festival; determine levels of knowledge regarding Catalan cuisine; and gather impressions about the organization of the festival.

Such knowledge is essential for the survival of the festival, making it more attractive and providing it with a competitive differential within the sector. Bonet, Castañer and Font (2009) stated that the design of a festival or event is not static but dynamic when it comes to the process of creation and expansion. Following this premise, this study proposes a reflection

that allows the festival organizers to redefine their objectives, resources, means of communication, level of attractiveness and significance; and to consider the value of developing and promoting local foods and products to improve the value of Catalan cuisine.

To this end, our aim is to provide a reflection on the role of this festival in the promotion of traditional Catalan cuisine. Hoffman, Beverland and Rasmussen (2001) noted that research has paid little attention to the role of regional cuisine at festivals, which attract a significant number of people who can increase loyalty to a destination and thereby help its promotion.

The cultural heritage of food

Within the perspectives of conservation and preservation, heritage plays a key role in today's society due to the values that can be assigned to it: whether economic, social, environmental or identity-related. Heritage is often intangible, ancient or contemporary and living.

The United Nations for Education, Science and Culture – UNESCO - includes various foods, culinary knowledge, dishes and food practices on its representative list of intangible cultural heritage for humanity (UNESCO, 2018). These include the Mediterranean diet (Italy, Spain, Morocco, Portugal, Greece, France, Croatia and Cyprus); traditional Mexican cuisine from the Michoacán region; French gastronomic food; the traditional way of making gingerbread in the north of Croatia; *Washoku* – the traditional food system in Japanese cuisine; *Keshkek* and the culture and tradition of coffee in Turkey; and *Kimchi* from South Korea.

Within this context, the growing recognition of different kinds of food, preparation techniques, flavors, and food knowledge and practices must be understood as cultural food heritage. Álvarez (2005, p. 11) stated that “human eating is a social and cultural act where the choice and consumption of food bring into play a set of ecological, historical, cultural, social and economic factors linked to a network of representations, symbolisms and rituals”. Thus, food and cuisine are essential elements of research for society and are the subject of many

studies in various areas of knowledge, which analyze eating habits, customs at the table, the origins of dishes, food traditions between generations, their etymology, their symbolism within society (cultural and religious), as well as the similarities and differences between dishes of different cultures. In this way, food, including hunting, gathering, agriculture, food preparation and consumption, and recipe books, are a very important part of cultural food heritage (Anderson, 2014; Bannerman, 1996; Contreras, 2007; Timothy, 2016).

In fact, food becomes a social tool, an element of cultural communication and hospitality (Contreras, 2007). This means that it is possible to bring people together through cuisine and their way of serving and sharing food is part of their cultural legacy. For Contreras and Gracia (2011), cuisine is the set of representations, beliefs, inherited knowledge and practices and/or learning that are associated with food and shared by certain individuals of a certain culture or social group. According to these authors, eating habits are shaped by food choices, this becoming a cultural foundation that incorporates physiological and psychosocial aspects linked to both the affective and the spiritual memory.

Among other features, climatic, topographic and hydrographic characteristics, referred to jointly as the *terroir*, also determine different or unique elements in each product, such as its consistency, aroma, physical appearance and taste. Geography can determine the taste of food and the range of items produced, depicting a geography of taste (Montanari, 2013). Foreigners can perceive subtle differences in flavors that are not perceived as such among locals.

More broadly, this whole set of representations becomes food heritage, characterized as a common good, a collective or shared heritage. In the same way, cultural food heritage awakens the interest of non-natives' interest in the "other" and, in parallel with globalization, a new interest arises in places that can lead to the strengthening of local cultural identities (Hall et al., 2003).

Girona province and its gastronomy

Catalan cuisine emerged from a combination of influences from other peoples and cultures that settled in the territory over centuries, including the Iberians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans and Arabs, who incorporated American products into the local cuisine in the fifteenth century. Today, Catalan cuisine therefore serves as a reflection of the country's history (Aulet, Mundet, & Roca, 2016).

Girona province is made up of regions whose gastronomy is very much marked by its *terroir*, generating special flavors between the sea and the mountain. Moreover, it has distinctive products such as anchovies from the Upper Empordà, Palamós prawns from the Lower Empordà, beef and derivatives from Cerdanya, products with “volcanic” ingredients from La Garrotxa, lamb and duck from Girona, honey from El Pla de L'Estany, mushrooms from Ripollés and cold meats from La Selva (Vilà, 2016).

UNESCO recognized the Mediterranean Diet as an intangible cultural heritage in 2010, as it is a healthy, nutritious diet characterized by the cultivation and consumption of olive oil, fruits, vegetables, fish and shellfish, some cereals and wine, combined with skills, knowledge, practices and traditions related to the production and consumption of these foods. Further reasons for its recognition were social practices at the dining table, dining behavior and the creation of personal bonds between diners.

In recent years, governments and institutions have recognized the value of gastronomy, making it a priority not only to promote a sense of authenticity and local identity, but also to protect products originating from the earth, foster ecological awareness, stimulate exchange between cultures and improve health. To achieve these objectives, strategic plans and management have been developed for gastronomy.

In 1992, the European Union introduced a policy to regulate differentiation of its agricultural products. The current regulation adopts provisions on protected geographical

indications (IGP), denominations of origin of agricultural and food products (DOP) and traditional specialties guaranteed (TSG), which are organized and recognized with EU symbols specified on the label. This has many social benefits, such as the dynamization of rural activity, providing consumers with objective information and increased farmer income (EU Law, 2017). These types of official instruments also benefit the construction of a local image for food or tastes, creating a business context that can work with the tourist imaginary (Timothy, 2016). This image created directly via the product's designation of origin allows tourists a closer approximation to the receiving community, making it a mechanism for recognizing and interpreting culture and traditions, and thereby valuing producers, distributors such as markets, local cuisine restaurants, crafts and souvenirs related to gastronomy.

Catalonia was declared the "European Region of Gastronomy 2016" due to its distinctive cuisine, territory and products. This recognition "highlights the quality of its agro-food and tourism heritage and symbolizes the excellence of its products, cuisine and traditions" (ACT, 2016, p. 7). The aims of this project are to disseminate knowledge to stimulate quality of life, sustainability and innovation in the food sector, as well as promoting food services, cultures and tourism (European region of gastronomy, 2017).

Therefore, Girona formed part of the Catalan Tourism Agency's "Gastronomy and Wine Tourism" plan in 2016, which sought to promote actions related to the gastronomic and wine tourism experience through traditional cuisine, wines, the local products and the territory, with a focus on the quality of local products and services.

Other important projects are also underway, such as the "Cuina Catalana" (Catalan Cuisine) brand, which has sought to position traditional Catalan cuisine as an identifying cultural brand through a seal of quality for the dishes and products that establish Catalan cuisine since 2001 (Catalan Cuisine Institute Foundation, 2017).

Another important factor in the promotion of Catalan cuisine is the work done by the Catalan government, *La Generalitat*, which has been implementing actions and supporting projects throughout the territory. One such example is the “Gastronomy Plan for Catalonia”, aimed at publicizing the variety and quality of the gastronomic products and services the region has to offer, promoting their identity, their heritage and their value. For Pujol (2009), these actions clearly indicate the central role that gastronomy has achieved as a cultural signifier in Catalonia.

The region is also characterized by having the highest concentration of Michelin star restaurants in Spain (54 establishments in 2017 – with a total of 68 stars between them), followed by the Basque Country and Madrid. Catalonia has an imaginative, creative, avant-garde and constantly evolving cuisine. Many of its chefs are part of the so-called gastronomic revolution that initially started with Ferran Adrià, followed by many others such as Carme Ruscalleda (ambassador of Catalan cuisine) and the Roca brothers, who make a connection between the cuisine and their environment (food, territory, landscape and culture). Thus, Girona presents an avant-garde gastronomy that combines tradition and innovation, presenting its territory and landscape, as well as its people, to the world (Aulet et al., 2016; Pujol, 2009).

Firatast: Una fira boníssima

Firatast: Una fira boníssima aims to promote products through food tasting and reached its 23rd year without undergoing any major transformations. The edition analyzed here lasted four days, from 6th to 9th October, 2016. A tasting menu with 275 products (drinks, dishes, desserts, bakery products and sandwiches) was presented, with 31 exhibitors per day (producers, distributors, associations, cooperatives, restaurants and local authorities). It is the largest tasting event in Catalonia (Firatast, 2016).

Receiving around 18,000 visitors (Firatast, 2016), the dynamics consisted of purchasing an entry ticket for €10 (which included entry and four tasting tickets). It also offered the possibility of acquiring further tasting tickets for the price of €1 each, which were then exchanged for tastings of variable values set by the exhibitors according to the product; for example: a cheese *tapa* (1 ticket), a serving of *paella* (3 tickets).

For the occasion, visitors created their own tasting menu in Small Food format, which allowed them to experience a greater variety of dishes at a lower cost. It is a festival with very peculiar characteristics that attracts the interest of local people by strengthening identities, memories, histories and culture. In this particular case, it also publicizes new tastes, techniques, traditions, types, and novelties in a festive way, thereby awarding value to Catalan cuisine. It is also a festival that promotes the integral development of the territory and generates income for its producers.

Method – Data collection and procedure

This study is exploratory and descriptive in nature, determining the priority of the qualitative aspects of the data. Exploratory research seeks to discover new perspectives and aspects regarding the reality surrounding the object of study (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003), and assists in establishing details found via analysis of previously unknown data (Creswell & Clark, 2013). On the other hand, the main objective of descriptive research is to provide a description of a population or phenomenon's characteristics and then establish relationships between variables in a clear, objective and concise manner (Gil, 1999; Veal, 2011).

The fieldwork was conducted using a survey questionnaire script with twenty close-ended and open-ended questions, which allowed a quantitative approach to the socio-demographic profile of visitors. The collection instrument was designed in accordance with the objectives proposed in this study, which included obtaining the information necessary for

organizing the event and resolving the problem presented by the researchers of identifying the socioeconomic profile of visitors and their perceptions of Catalan cuisine. The questions were divided into two large blocks: a) demographic profile of visitors; b) the visitors' behavior and perceptions of the festival.

The research was carried out on 6th, 7th and 8th October 2016, corresponding to three of the four days of the festival. Regarding the composition of the sample, it followed Lakatos and Marconi's (2003) proposal for obtaining specificity and legitimacy in the results. For this study, a non-probabilistic strategy of informant selection was chosen, characterized by the intentionality of the investigated subjects, using information they provided voluntarily (Pérez de Tuleda, 2007).

Aaker, Kumar and Day (2001) considered the target population to be defined as a set of themes that have some common characteristics in relation to the research problem. Based on this premise, respondent selection was carried out using the following criteria: a) having already done their tasting at the festival; b) being over 18 years of age. The valid sample had 119 respondents matching these characteristics.

For a greater understanding of the data, a semi-structured interview was conducted in order to obtain data such as subjectivity in participants' perceptions and experiences. This interview was conducted with one of the managers of *Firatast* - representing the company *Incatís* - on 8th November 2016 by means of open and directive questions. The aim here was to obtain more detailed information on the topic, its history, information on the number of exhibitors, number of visitors and other relevant data for the investigation, such as the concept and objectives of the event.

The data obtained were analyzed and interpreted on three levels: the first, which involved interpretation, entailed comparing the research objectives with the data obtained; the second entailed explaining the phenomena that occurred in the collected data; and lastly,

specification, where the researcher explained to what extent the relationships between the objectives are valid, as well as their origins and limitations (Lakatos & Marconi, 2003).

Results

The results are divided into two sections. First we define the sociodemographic profile of the set of individuals interviewed before then providing a list of their actions and perceptions of the festival.

Socio-demographic profile of visitors to Firatast 2016

The information that can be obtained on the sociodemographic profile of visitors to a festival can be key in determining the set of actions necessary to manage the event (Bonet et al., 2009; Cerezuela, 2005). Regarding the organization of the *Firatast 2016* festival, no type of evaluation was applied to visitors to the fair. The data presented in Tables 1 and 2 therefore provide a summary of this sociodemographic profile of the *Firatast 2016* visitor.

According to the results of the questionnaires, 90% of respondents were from Catalonia, specifically 53% being residents of the city of Girona. Of the 10% of foreigners, 34% were from China, 25% from Honduras, 17% from Venezuela, 8% from Brazil, 8% from Scotland and 8% from Russia (Table 1). These results derive from the fact that the festival has residents of the city of Girona and the surrounding area as its main target audience. Rusher (2003) has described this feature: that the public at festivals and events always comprises the immediate regional community.

The survey data reveal a diverse public in many respects, with the exception of gender, which was predominantly female (70%), with 29% men and 1% undetermined. Regarding age, visitors of all ages were present, with a greater concentration between 18 and 37. It is worth

highlighting the high educational level of the demand, 54% of whom had higher education (35% with university and 19% postgraduate education) (Table 1).

As for occupation, 40% of the participants were wage earners, 16% self-employed professionals, 15% civil servants, 13% students, and 3% unemployed (Table 1). Naturally, the number of unemployed was low due to the limitations on consumption experienced by people without employment. With regard to monthly income, it was observed that 34% of visitors receive up to the equivalent of two minimum wages, 25% up to three minimum wages and a large number, representing 15%, chose not to declare their income (Table 1).

Thus, it is possible to cross-analyze the data, segmenting socioeconomic aspects by gender. In doing so, we identified a predominance of women in two large groups. One comprises single women with technical or secondary education who work as civil servants or are students, in the age group 18 to 37. The other group comprises married women with a university or postgraduate education who work as wage earners, business owners/self-employed, and are between 38 and 57 years of age.

As previously discussed, the male cohort is smaller. It comprises one group of single men with secondary or technical training who work as civil servants, wage earners or students, and are in the age group 18 to 37. In addition, a larger group is comprised of married men with a university education and aged between 38 and 67.

The fact that demand for *Firatast* is made up of diverse sociodemographic profiles points to the attractiveness of gastronomic festivals (Getz, 2000) and highlights the relevance of the festival as an integrator of a territory (Rusher, 2003) and diffuser of cultural aspects such as Catalan cuisine.

The actions and perceptions of visitors to Firatast 2016

From the results, it was observed that 32% of respondents had visited *Firatast* on two occasions and 25% on more than three. These data reveal that a large part of the public is already loyal to the festival (57% of respondents), which demonstrates the public's loyalty to the festival and tourist destination (Hoffman et al., 2001). This is important, because this public may have more experience of the object of study and be able to more accurately discern, think about and identify the aspects analyzed in this research.

In addition, the results showed that 43% of participants at the festival were accompanied by friends, 27% by partners, 26% by family, 1% were alone and 3% with others (not specified by the respondents). This again highlights the eclectic nature of the public and the need for this festival to adapt its artistic and cultural program to this broad and heterogeneous audience.

Regarding visitors' average expenditure, the results obtained show that it was not very high, indicating direct consumption with the act of tasting and not the purchasing of local products, which would have entailed higher amounts being spent. Thus, 29% of visitors had an average spend of €10, 53% an average of €11 to €20, and 9% between €21 and €30.

A key issue for this type of festival is the quality of the tasting. Although 68% of the visitors evaluated it as "very good", 20% rated it as only "acceptable". Many respondents complained that in other recent editions of the *Firatast* the quantity and quality of the tasting dishes had decreased. Considering that the link between promoter, organizer and exhibitors is essential to the festival's success, there is a clear need to emphasize the exhibitors' commitment to offer their best products. Rusher (2003) pointed out that food consumption at festivals is largely symbolic and a ritual of satisfaction and pleasure, where the participant seeks to escape from their normal eating habits. Therefore, the organization needs to work in this direction, bearing in mind this type of expectation from visitors.

In order to explore the results in detail, since we were using qualitative variables a bivariate statistical analysis was performed using the chi-square test aimed at identifying the

association or dependence between two variables. The choice of variable was made according to the aims presented for this investigation, but recurrence of non-dependent variables was observed regardless of the cross-referencing of the data. Therefore, the authors decided to present only the most significant variables for this study, such as expenses x quality of tasting and expenses x variety of tasting.

Using the variables expenses x quality of the tasting and expenses x variety of the tasting, purchasing power was identified as being concentrated below €30 (as previously mentioned), there being a dependent correlation between the amount spent on the tastings and the visitors' perceptions. That is, the greater the value invested in tastings, the better the visitor's perception of the quality and variety of the dishes of the festival. This contributes to the recognition of traditional techniques related to preparation, flavors and local ingredients, which is important for maintaining food cultural heritage (Contreras, 2007).

Taking all the interviewees from the *Firatast* festival (100%) as a sample, for the variables expenses x quality of the tasting, a total of 29% of the visitors had an average expenditure of €10. Of this sample, 29.4% evaluated the quality of the tasting as "good". In addition, a total of 53% of respondents had an average expenditure of €11 to €20, and 52.9% of them rated the quality of the tasting as "very good".

The same dependence is perceived between the expenditure variables x quantity of the tasting. Of the 29% of respondents who spent €10, a total of 29.4% evaluated the tasting variety as "good". In addition, 53% of visitors who spent between €11 and €20, a total of 52.9 % indicated the variety of the tasting as "very good". And 9% who spent between €21 and €30, a total of 9.2% rated it as "excellent".

The research participants made a number of suggestions. The most important was entry being more affordable or even free. This issue is directly linked to the festival management, which has established a commercial agreement with the exhibitors according to which for every

euro collected, 30% is allocated to the organization in order to cover costs and the remaining 70% to the exhibitors. It should be noted that this research did not aim to analyze the financial health of the festival.

Regarding the festival's communication, when asked how they had found out about it, 31% of the visitors interviewed said it was through friends or relatives. This is relevant information, revealing that disclosure directly by "word of mouth" is significant for the festival and directly related to visitors' level of satisfaction in past editions. This phenomenon can also be associated with the fact that many customers were already loyal to the festival, as previously mentioned. A further 25% of respondents found out about it through posters around the city and in shopping stores, which confirms that this traditional method of promoting a festival has had sufficiently satisfactory results with respect to *Firatast*. Another 21% of the population found out via the Internet (festival website, social networks and online press), which also establishes an important fact: that growth in these media means managers can intensify this way of promoting the festival. In addition, 12% of visitors received information through newspapers, 6% from other events taking place simultaneously around the *Firatast* or via the city's office of tourism, and the remaining 5% were invited. None of the participants chose the option: recommendation by a hotel. However, tourists were found to be present at the festival, demonstrating the possibility of a new channel for dissemination and promotion, that is, the tourism sector, which guarantees the opportunity to increase demand. This shows that the cuisine or gastronomy of a country is an essential attribute of a destination's image, which is why it is commonplace in the modern-day advertising and promotion of tourist destinations (Getz, 2000; Hall et al., 2003).

It was observed that 96% of respondents looked for information on the website prior to the visit, thus making it a strategic tool for communication with the potential and real public at the festival. Respondents also had a high evaluation of the website, 56% rating it "very good"

and 40% “good”. However, the observation was also made that certain information was missing, such as the activities programmed, the price of entry, access to the festival, and infrastructure such as parking and accessibility.

Other issues directly related to visitors’ perceptions aimed to identify their views on the organization of the festival in general, as can be seen in Table 2. The most criticized point regarding the organization of *Firatast 2016* was linked to infrastructure, such as ticket sales, number of bathrooms and baby facilities, rest areas and parking. In contrast, participants evaluated access to the festival as “very good” (79%), with only 7% saying it was “acceptable”. Among the means of transport used to reach *Firatast*, 75% used their own vehicle, while 21% walked directly to the site. This shows that the current location of the festival is strategic and a great success, as it facilitates logistics and an increase in both supply and demand.

Cleaning was another factor emphasized by visitors, with 14% rating it only as “acceptable” (Table 2). In this context, participants were mainly referring to two aspects of the festival, the utensils used to eat food (glasses and cutlery), which did not appear to be clean enough, and the cleaning of tables in the dining room. Although visitors were supposed to pick up their own trays with dishes, glasses, etc. after eating and discard them in a specific location, many left rubbish on the tables, which required the presence of cleaning staff to carry out this service.

The external signs at the festival were rated as “very good” by 70% of visitors. However, the internal signs, referring to the map of the festival, emergency exits, bathrooms and other elements, were rated as only “acceptable” by 14% (Table 2). On this point, the festival organizers should take corrective measures to improve the internal flow and visitor comfort.

As for accessibility, this was rated as “acceptable” by 12% of respondents, mainly the elderly population and adults accompanied by children, who experienced difficulties moving around with equipment such as pushchairs.

The general organization of the festival was rated as “very good” by 65% of respondents and “acceptable” by only 8% (Table 2). Many aspects were highlighted as positive and very well evaluated throughout the festival, such as the organization and design of the stands, the communication process and general safety at the event.

With regard to cultural attractions, 73% rated them as “very good” and only 6% as “acceptable”. In spite of this positive assessment, 62% of respondents pointed to the need to organize a greater number of cultural activities for all ages, since cultural programming was more directed towards children. They emphasized that the festival would be more attractive and interesting with a wide and varied cultural program and that this would stimulate a longer visit, which was between 2 and 3 hours in 2016, and lead to repeat visits over the days of the event and therefore impact on the consumption of the products offered by the festival, as well as promoting the tourist destination (Getz, 2000).

When asked about the possibility of returning for the next edition, 74% confirmed their intention to return, while 2.5% would not return and 23.5% said possibly. These figures clearly show that the organization still needs to implement actions to ensure that a significant portion of visitors remain loyal to the festival. Regarding the analysis of whether participants would recommend the festival to other people, 86% said yes, 4% no and 10% maybe. By performing a cross-data analysis with the variables “return to the festival x recommend Firatast”, we could note that all first-time visitors to the festival would return and recommend it to others. Furthermore, of those attending the festival for the second time, most would return to the event, and all would recommend it, even though there were a few negative responses. As for the audience attending the event for the third time or more, they were more critical and divided on whether or not they would return to the festival or recommend it. This is the public that has followed the historical evolution of the event and can contribute in a very positive way with suggestions for improvement with regard to planning and management.

A key point in the results is visitors' motivation to find out about the festival. As noted above, *Firatast* is a commercial fair that aims to introduce producers and distributors, whether private companies, cooperatives or associations, to their potential customers through the tasting of their products. It is a dynamic format for exhibitors of commercial products. However, it was found that 59% of visitors are motivated to visit and return to the festival for the tasting. For respondents, it was an opportunity to eat different dishes at a more affordable price, as well as eating traditional Catalan recipes that are generally not served in the city's restaurants. In addition, 28% said that the visit to the festival was a leisure activity with family and friends, with no commercial interest. Nonetheless, 7% of visitors declared an interest in learning about new products in the region with a view to purchasing them later in the city's shops. In addition, 4% said they were attending the festival because they had an invitation. Only 2% said they were interested in new suppliers. No respondents chose the option: for business purposes.

Respondents were asked to carry out a self-assessment regarding their knowledge of Catalan cuisine. As a result, 58% responded that they had a "very good" knowledge of it, 35% "good", 4% "very little" and for 3% it was "completely unknown". This variable was dependent on the variable origin of respondents, since 90% of the public is Spanish (Catalan) and has an intrinsic knowledge of Catalan cuisine, and foreigners were the only ones who mentioned not having knowledge of it. Therefore, *Firatast* can become a tool for gastronomic cultural diffusion through the promotion of culinary cultural content, since many of its visitors, even locals, do not have an in-depth knowledge of the culture of Catalan cuisine. It presents the traditional cuisine and also gastronomic innovation, and is therefore of great importance for showcasing cuisine as an expression of culture and heritage, as recognized by UNESCO.

In addition, with regard to the menu offered by the fair, 37% of respondents reported it as presenting Catalan cuisine "very well", 50% "well", 11% "not very well" and 2% did not have the necessary knowledge to make this assessment. Relating the variables "visitor's

residence x recognizes Catalan cuisine", we observed that, like the variable mentioned above, these are dependent variables. Therefore, according to the results identified in this research, the Firatast festival reaffirms the role of such events in presenting and promoting the territory and its local culinary products, thus contributing to the appreciation of culture, landscape and territory (Getz, 2000; Timothy, 2016). Food has been used as a means to learn about and support identities, especially due to the fact that what and how we eat are basic aspects of our culture (Hjalager & Richards, 2002).

In the in-depth interview with the festival organizers, they indicated that they did not conduct any evaluation with visitors, but had noticed in empirical terms this change in the profile of the public –from commercial to cultural– compared to the profile of public projected in the original event planning. No action had yet addressed this new reality, however. One of the perceptions of the participants was a reduction in the number of exhibitors at the festival (Figure 1), when in fact interpretation of the data obtained directly from the organizers would suggest that it had risen.

Thus, our study can be said to have achieved its objectives. Based on all observations made during this research, it is suggested that new proposals be formulated to adapt to and satisfy the needs and desires of this profile of visitor, since, according to Hjalager and Richards (2002), the new tourist profile seeks combinations of food and drink with experiences that encourage learning. In addition, gastronomy offers many possibilities with regard to activities, content, learning, integration, reflection and entertainment.

Therefore, in accordance with the theoretical framework presented throughout this article, we expect this study on Firatast to contribute effectively to the planning and dynamic organization of the festival and make it more attractive and competitive in the sector (Bonet et al., 2009). Cerezuela (2005) also stated that in planning an event it is important to detect those aspects, moments or issues that represent a higher risk and be more attentive to their treatment

and resolution. It is therefore important to identify some possible opportunities for intervention that promote the good progress or continuity of the project.

The data presented in the study show that the *Firatast* festival is not just a simple gastronomic event offering food and drink. Rather, it is responsible for assisting in tourist promotion, destination image and city branding (Allen et al., 2008; Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Getz, 2000; Hall et al., 2003; Hall & Sharples, 2008). It promotes Girona as a gastronomic location formed by cultural and identity values, and which maintains food and culinary techniques and traditions, while at the same time presenting innovations, with gastronomy being an important cultural expression (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Poulain, 2007, 2013; Rand & Heath, 2006;). And it also provides for new business opportunities (Dwyer et al., 2005; Huang et al., 2010), uniting the entire gastronomic production chain and generating the sustainable development of the activity, as well as strengthening the identity of IGP, DOP and TSG products, and promoting cultural food heritage.

Conclusions

The article presents a study on the profile of the visiting public the 23^a *Firatast - Una fira boníssima* and perceptions regarding its organization and the gastronomic and cultural elements presented during the event. Moreover, summarizing the conclusions, *Firatast* promotes the economic development of new markets and favors the development of the destination as a brand, as well as having effects on cultural appreciation, recognition and belonging for the local cuisine.

In relation to the practical implications of the study, determining the sociodemographic profile of visitors to *Firatast* 2016 enables its managers to establish actions necessary to manage the festival (infrastructure, communication, marketing, programming, others) and its logistics. The presence of a diversified (in terms of age, gender, nationality, profession, and

other factors) and assiduous demand demonstrates the attractiveness of a regional gastronomy festival like *Firatast* and how such events can present the territory and its terroir.

We have therefore studied the actions, perceptions habits and preferences of visitors to *Firatast*, providing us with essential data that can be used as a strategic tool to guide the concept of the festival and its marketing and cultural needs.

In general, the organization of the festival was rated highly by participants. They generally expressed the desire to return for the next edition, and to tell others about the festival. Their perception was that the number of exhibitors had shrunk in recent years and they were not completely satisfied with the range, quality and quantity of the tastings on offer. At the same time, however, this public claimed that the menus at *Firatast* present traditional Catalan cuisine, highlighting elements of its identity, memory, landscape, history and culture. The results contribute to understanding how gastronomic festivals can represent cultural values and regional identities, such as Catalan cuisine and Mediterranean cuisine, which is considered a cultural heritage of humanity.

The main suggestions or observations were related to cultural elements. The principal finding of our research was that the original concept of the festival no longer meets the wishes and needs of its visitors. Although the original purpose of *Firatast* was to stimulate the commercial side of the regional gastronomic production chain, it was observed that visitors to the festival do not share the same objectives. The participants expressed an interest in a more extensive, diverse and content-based programming that generates an experience. Therefore, it is suggested that the *Firatast* organizers adopt a conscious position that representing Catalan cuisine constitutes an asset for the creation of cultural and gastronomic content for the interested parties. It is essential that a program be developed that is aimed at gastronomic cultural experience and interpretation from the perspective of the user, including such activities as food production, exhibitions, gastronomic literature, workshops and external activities

(visits to farms, companies, associations, cooperatives and tourist routes or itineraries), proposing innovative actions in the context of gastronomic festivals. It is important to identify some possible opportunities for intervention that promote progress and the continuity of the project.

The cultural motivation of demand demonstrates that these festivals can strengthen territorial integration of the entire productive chain (producer, distributor and consumers). In addition, brands or projects such as “Cuina Catalana”, “European Region of Gastronomy” and “Gastronomy Plan of Catalonia” should strengthen their relationship with this type of festival. Therefore, the festival should be promoted by taking advantage of the possibility to attract more sponsors interested in this type of cultural investment and thereby increase the number of exhibitors and visitors.

However, there has been a lack of in-depth academic discussion regarding the harmonious relationship between traditional cuisine and innovative gastronomy and the reinterpretation of typical dishes at gastronomic festivals.

The limitation of this research was its focus being limited to visitors and organizers, and not including exhibitors. However, as future lines of research, we would initially suggest an ongoing assessment of the visitor profile and visitors’ perceptions. It would also be interesting to measure the economic impact of the festival in the local community, as well as studying the profile of exhibitors, objectives and results. Similarly, it would be ideal to conduct an in-depth cultural study into the gastronomic elements at the fair.

In its current form, Firatast is an instrument for the cultural diffusion of Catalan gastronomy, since it strongly highlights the cultural elements of gastronomy. This research constitutes a first academic study of the festival and contributes to a reflection on how a commercial festival carries elements that are essentially cultural. In the specific object of study

here, great importance is detected in the transmission of traditional values with regard to local and collective culinary culture, which are inseparable from cuisine, gastronomy and territory.

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