

Tasting Tourism: Evaluating Gastro Offerings in Sarajevo and Mostar via TripAdvisor Reviews

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Abstract

Sarajevo and Mostar, the most visited destinations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), are well known for their gastronomic offerings. Influenced by diverse traditions and cultures, their culinary scenes reflect a notable influence of the Ottoman Empire. Both destinations boast numerous restaurants serving delicious dishes from both local and international cuisines. As online review platforms are a leading source of information in hospitality and tourism, this paper analyses TripAdvisor reviews of 56 restaurants in Sarajevo and 21 restaurants in Mostar that specialize in offering local cuisine. Given that traditional dishes have become a key factor in destination selection and tourist attraction, the aim of this study is to assess tourist satisfaction and highlight similarities and differences in perceptions of the local gastronomic offer in Sarajevo and Mostar. The research findings indicate that the most influential factor in tourist satisfaction is the balance between food quality and price. Interestingly, in both destinations, tourists perceive the local cuisine as Bosnian cuisine. The results of this analysis may serve as a valuable tool for policymakers and businesses to develop and effectively promote local gastronomic offerings.

Keywords: Sarajevo, Mostar, TripAdvisor, local cuisine, content analysis, reviews

Introduction

Gastronomy is often defined as a unique food-based experience (Di-Clemente et al., 2019), a food consumption experience (Soltani et al., 2020), or part of the overall restaurant experience (Huang, 2017). It has become an important part of the tourism offer (Ruiz, Guzman-Parra, 2023), and many destinations integrate local cuisine into the tourism product as a mean of attracting more tourists (Robinson, Getz, 2014; Gupta, 2018; Vrasida et al., 2020). Maryam et al. (2019) point out that tourist satisfaction and their intention to visit the destination again are linked to a positive experience of local cuisine. Consuming local food significantly influences tourists' future visit intentions and the overall destination image (Rousta, Jamshidi, 2020). Bertan (2020) states that local gastronomy represents a significant strategic advantage and reflects the cultural identity of a destination. This is confirmed by Kumar et al. (2023) who point-

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ed out that local cuisine is a key reflection of regional identity, i.e. the culture and traditions of the people who live there. Visiting local restaurants also affects the perception of the destination, as well as the lasting memories and experiences that tourists take with them (Nowacki et al., 2023), so it is additionally important to analyze the level of satisfaction of tourists with the local gastronomic offer.

The rich culture and tradition, as well as the geographical context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, represent an important potential for the development of food tourism. Its cuisine, which was influenced by Byzantine, Ottoman and Western Europe, is similar to the cuisine of Turkey, Greece, and Central Europe. Although, traditional Bosnian cuisine reflects a strong influence of Turkish cuisine, some dishes and customs share similarities with the countries of the region. Research conducted on gastronomy in BiH is largely based on survey research on tourists' perceptions of local cuisine. In this way, key factors that influence tourist satisfaction have been defined, highlighting the uniqueness of taste, quality and price, emotional perception and cultural significance (Peštek, Činžarević, 2014). Recently, Banda et al. (2023) analyzed tourist satisfaction with local cuisine in Sarajevo based on collected TripAdvisor reviews.

In addition to the recommendations from family and friends, online platforms are becoming an increasingly important source of information when choosing a restaurant (Živadinović, 2021). The importance of online reviews is emphasized by Kim et al. (2016), stating that a greater number of positive reviews has a positive impact on restaurant business, especially among young people. One of the most popular platforms for leaving reviews is TripAdvisor, which provides information about destinations, attractions, restaurants, hotels, etc.

This research analyzes tourists' perceptions of local cuisine authenticity, quality of food and beverages, as well as overall satisfaction with restaurant service in Sarajevo and Mostar, one of the leading tourist destinations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sarajevo has stood out as the most visited tourist destination in BiH for a number of years, leading in terms of the total number of arrivals (41.3% of total arrivals in BiH in 2023) and overnight stays (39.3% of total overnight stays in BiH in 2023). In 2023, Mostar accounted for 5.2% of total tourist arrivals in BiH and 3.6% of total overnight stays. It is important to note that these statistical data should be interpreted with caution due to unregistered visitors and the significant share of the grey economy in this sector. Also, segment of one-day visits is particularly pronounced in Mostar. Estimates and reports indicate that more than a million tourists visited Mostar in 2024, with a significant increase in group arrivals. Both cities have continuously registered an increase in accommodation and hospitality capacities, which confirms their status as leading urban tourist centers in the country.

Given the growing gastronomic appeal, this research focuses on similarities and differences in perceptions of local cuisine in Sarajevo ("Bosnian city") and Mostar ("Herzegovinian city") by analyzing online tourist reviews. Special attention is paid to positive impressions, establishing the connection between tourist satisfaction and the authenticity of local gastronomy.

Methods and data

The criteria for selecting restaurants in Sarajevo and Mostar were defined based on the research conducted by López-Guzmán and Sánchez-Cañizares (2012). The restaurant selection criteria were based on the representation of traditional local cuisine in the gastronomic offer. Based on the aforementioned criteria, 56 restaurants in Sarajevo and 21 in Mostar were selected, which were rated on TripAdvisor, served traditional food, and were located in the most tourist-friendly parts of the city (in this case, Baščaršija in Sarajevo and the Old Town in Mo-

star). For practical reasons, only reviews in English were analyzed, as this is the most common language on the platforms and reduces the risk of misinterpretation that might arise from translating reviews in other languages. Reviews for Sarajevo were collected manually, as part of the research conducted by Banda et al. (2023), and reviews for Mostar using Outscraper software.

A total of 12,463 reviews (foreign and domestic tourists) were collected, of which 7,239 for Sarajevo and 5,224 for Mostar submitted until the end of November 2023. Restaurant reviews were further categorized based on the assigned ratings from 1 (terrible) to 5 (excellent).

The content analysis of the reviews was preceded by a standard filter sorting procedure proposed by Vijayarani et al. (2015). This procedure involves excluding punctuation marks, eliminating capital letters (for words that are not proper nouns), emoticons and other characters. Also, a list of stop words was defined that was adapted to the specifics of the analyzed reviews to ensure the relevance of the results. Adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns and other contextually unnecessary words and phrases were omitted from the analysis. Also, stemming (Higuchi, 2016) was used at this stage, in order to reduce the words to their basic form (e.g., removing plural and pronoun forms), which facilitated further analysis.

In the next phase of the research, Text2data in Excel was used for word frequency analysis, while co-occurrence and thematic analysis were carried out with the help of KH-Coder. The conducted word frequency analysis enabled the identification of the most frequently mentioned words in the reviews. The co-occurrence analysis was conducted based on similar research conducted by Bigne et al. (2023) and García-León and Teichert (2023), and enabled the analysis of the connections between words within the reviews, describing the dining experience in Sarajevo and Mostar, and their graphical representation. It was designed using the Jaccard coefficient, which shows how often individual words in a review appear together, compared to appearing alone. Using thematic analysis, the main themes for Sarajevo and Mostar were defined, and frequent words repeated in the reviews were grouped in accordance with co-occurrence analysis.

Results

Word frequency analysis

The most frequently used terms in reviews reveal interesting similarities and differences in perceptions of food, service, and atmosphere in restaurants in these cities. “Food” takes first place, appearing 4,960 times in reviews for Sarajevo and 3,443 times in reviews for Mostar, which is expected, given that this is an analysis of restaurants and cuisine. Key adjectives such as “good”, “great”, “nice”, and “delicious” are used to describe the quality of food, service, and overall experience in both cities. At the same time, the terms “local” and “traditional” further emphasize the authenticity of local cuisine that attracts tourists.

The term “price” is often associated with the accessibility of food and drinks in Sarajevo and Mostar, and the excellent price-quality ratio is also highlighted in the reviews. “Bosnian”, the term of primary importance for this study, appears 1,534 times in reviews for Sarajevo restaurants, which ranks it in eighth place, and is also mentioned in reviews for Mostar restaurants (555 times). The authors expected that reviews of Mostar restaurants would highlight the names of traditional Herzegovinian dishes, as a key element of the region’s gastronomic identity. However, tourists do not mention “Herzegovinian cuisine” in their reviews, and instead of

focusing on traditional specialties, reviews are more concerned with situational factors, such as ambiance, service, or the overall experience of visiting restaurants. Also, the focus is on specific attractions such as the Old Bridge and views of the Neretva River. In Sarajevo, reviews emphasize the wide culinary offer and focus on food and atmosphere, but terms such as “meat” and “cevapi” for which Sarajevo is famous are at the bottom of the table (Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency of top keywords

No	SARAJEVO		MOSTAR	
	Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency
1	food	4,960	food	3,480
2	place	3,339	restaurant	1,979
3	restaurant	3,156	good	1,856
4	good	3,118	great	1,480
5	Sarajevo	2,541	place	1,460
6	great	2,259	Mostar	1,450
7	service	1,700	service	1,425
8	Bosnian	1,534	view	1,252
9	eat	1,526	nice	1,041
10	nice	1,514	bridge	990
11	recommend	1,452	recommend	933
12	best	1,435	price	884
13	try	1,341	friendly	882
14	delicious	1,103	staff	841
15	local	1,074	local	828
16	come	1,060	meat	813
17	traditional	944	delicious	804
18	visit	853	eat	786
19	tasty	827	best	699
20	atmosphere	805	excellent	650
21	price	777	dish	598
22	bread	760	meal	581
23	wine	748	traditional	570
24	meat	728	portion	568
25	cevapi	713	Bosnian	555

Source: Banda et al. (2023); Primary data

Co-occurrence and thematic analysis

Out of a total of 14 clusters for Sarajevo and 15 for Mostar, only the first four were analyzed, as they are the most thematically relevant and include the largest number of reviews (Figure 1).

There are three key elements of the cluster: colors indicate thematic clusters formed based on semantic and frequency connections between concepts; the size of the circle is proportional to the frequency of occurrence of a particular word, while the thickness of the lines between the circles reflects the intensity of their mutual connections.

Cluster 1 for Sarajevo indicates highly positive impressions of restaurant staff, who contribute to creating a unique tourist experience. On the other hand, Cluster 1 related to Mostar suggests that restaurant choices are closely tied to their location, particularly the Neretva River and the Old Bridge. In both cases, Cluster 2 is related to the gastronomic offerings of the restaurants, reflecting the connection between quality, ambiance, and the rich offering of local dishes, emphasizing the variety of ingredients.

Cluster 3 in the context of Sarajevo include key term, Bosnian cuisine, but emphasizing also different menu options (vegan and vegetarian, gluten-free meals etc.). In contrast, Cluster 3 for Mostar shifts focus to hygiene and staff, especially indicating cleanliness and the quality of the food preparation.

Cluster 4 in Sarajevo highlights visitor experiences and their recommendations with the terms “recommend,” “place,” “best,” and “visit” reflecting the significance of gastronomic and cultural experiences for generating positive recommendations and repeat visits. Conversely, Cluster 4 for Mostar emphasizes the balance between price and quality, by suggesting generous portions offered at affordable prices. The remaining clusters related to Sarajevo highlight the key role of local cuisine, while in the case of Mostar, the greatest emphasis is placed on food quality and expertise of the staff.

Thematic analysis of restaurant reviews in Sarajevo pointed to similarities with Mostar. In both cities, four common themes dominate, which relate to traditional cuisine, authentic experience and ambiance of the city, prices and quality of food, and service and staff. The first and most significant theme, traditional cuisine is characterized by authentic Bosnian dishes, which is often highlighted in reviews. The second theme, ambiance and authentic experience, refers to the location of the restaurant. In the case of Mostar, the reviews mention the Old Town, and especially the view of the Old Bridge, which is an important element of the gastronomic experience. Reviews for Sarajevo emphasize the ambiance of Baščaršija. The keywords of the third theme (“reasonable”, “value”, “worth”, “cheap” etc.) indicate tourist satisfaction with prices and food quality. The fourth theme, which relates to service and staff, recognizes the slowness of staff during the tourist season in both cities as an important challenge for both destinations. On the other hand, a positively rated aspect of this theme is the friendliness of the staff. The fifth theme in the case of Mostar is wine and local drinks, especially the Herzegovinian wines Žilavka and Blatina, which play an important role in the gastronomic offer of this city. On the other hand, fifth theme, Bosnian coffee and baklava are often mentioned and positively evaluated parts of the gastronomic offer of Sarajevo restaurants.

Clusters also reflect a broader dimension of the cultural identity of the destination, where traditional cuisine, experience, hospitality and local people are key elements in shaping the image of Sarajevo and Mostar. That means that food is an integral part of the overall branding strategy and destination competitiveness. Food-related attributes of the offer should be part of the storytelling associated with the destination’s brand identity and promise.

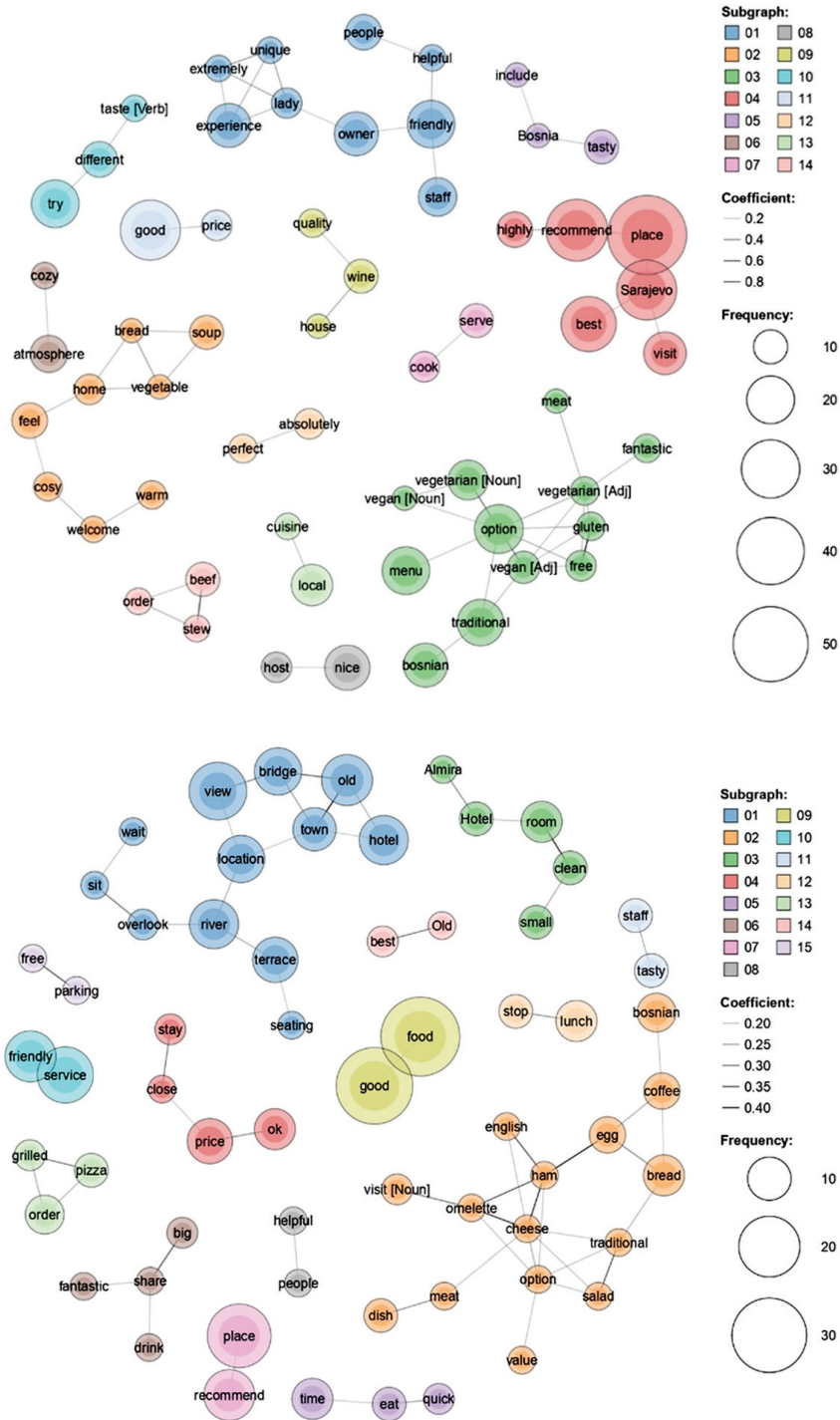


Figure 1. Co-occurrence network results (first Sarajevo; second Mostar)

Source: Primary data

Discussion

Although Sarajevo and Mostar are recognized as destinations offering unique culinary experiences, this research has also revealed certain differences that point to distinct aspects of the gastronomic experience that tourists particularly pay attention to.

The themes in reviews of Sarajevo's restaurants highlight Bosnian cuisine, but also the presence of various international cuisines. Positive impressions, associated with authentic food, are as pointed out by Hoang and Tučkova (2021) linked to loyalty and repeat visits. Surprisingly, in Mostar's reviews, Bosnian cuisine is once again mentioned rather than Herzegovinian. The mention of local wines, Žilavka and Blatina, further distinguishes Mostar from Sarajevo, where tourists often point out the lack of alcoholic beverages in restaurant offerings. The fact that Herzegovinian cuisine is not mentioned in reviews indicates the absence of a clearly differentiated brand for Herzegovina. Integrating traditional Herzegovinian cuisine into the tourism offer would contribute to a better perception of Herzegovina as an authentic and recognizable destination.

An important finding of this research is that tourists perceive the local cuisine as good and of high quality, which aligns with the results of Peštek and Činjurević (2014) and is consistent with other studies emphasizing the role of food quality in shaping tourist satisfaction, e.g., Muskat et al. (2019); Zrnić et al. (2021); Hernandez-Rojas et al. (2021). Many studies confirm that the food image and quality at a destination influence tourists' intention and willingness to revisit and to recommend the destination to others (Wondirad et al., 2021; Yazicioğlu et al., 2023; Wachyuni et al., 2024). Key finding of this research is that tourists are generally satisfied with prices and positively evaluate portion sizes, especially in the case of Mostar. The importance of food quality and pricing for tourists has also been confirmed more recent studies on restaurant re-patronage (Abdullah et al., 2018) and food tourism revisits (Rousta, Jamshidi, 2020).

This research also contributes to the literature in the context of tourists' perceptions of local cuisine in tourist destinations. While the literature often focuses on national or regional cuisine as a single, unified category (Jovičić Vuković, Terzić, 2020), this study highlights the existence of distinct local cuisine contexts within the same country, which influence tourist expectations and shape diverse culinary experiences.

Conclusion

This research contributes to the field of culinary tourism and helps to better understand how tourists perceive the local gastronomic offer in Sarajevo and Mostar, two of the most visited tourist destinations in BiH. The results highlight both similarities and differences in the perceived gastronomic experience, emphasizing the role of local cuisine and the spatial identity of cities in shaping the overall tourist experience.

Understanding how tourists perceive local cuisine, restaurants, and the overall service can assist destination management organizations and local providers in adapting their offers to meet visitor preferences. The results of the research provide a foundation for planning tourism development and designing new tourist products based on authentic local cuisine, tradition, and atmosphere.

This research can also serve as a basis for developing a strategy for branding Herzegovinian cuisine, primarily through cooperation with local agricultural producers, tourism businesses, promotional activities, and training of hospitality staff. By creating a gastronomic identity for

Herzegovina—which tourists currently do not perceive strongly—this region could clearly distinguish itself from the rest of the culinary scene in BiH, enabling the development of tourism with a focus on gastronomic experiences.

Emphasizing local food is crucial for creating a unique tourism brand (Peštek et al., 2020; Tagmanov, Ulema, 2023). Lower representation of Herzegovinian cuisine in clusters indicates a lack of systemic and effective communication of this element of the offer connected to Herzegovina's brand identity. This is one of the imperatives for destination management and brand strategy development. Herzegovina has all the preconditions for successful positioning on the tourist market as a unique foodie destination, which would significantly improve the overall effects of tourism.

In order to further develop gastronomic tourism in BiH, future research should include more cities (e.g., Banja Luka) or traditional regions (e.g., Krajina), with the aim of conducting a comparative analysis of existing gastronomic offerings and exploring how tourists perceive different local cuisines. Also, it is recommended to conduct both quantitative and qualitative research with respondents from different tourist segments and geographical regions.

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