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Evidence of Local Gastronomy in Rural Destinations: A Cross-European Study

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Abstract

In 2020, the Coronavirus pandemic led to domestic travel to rural destinations. Local gastronomy is key to tourists' expectations, perceptions, and images of rural destinations' authenticity. Empirical data supporting evidence of local gastronomy in rural communities are lacking. This archival research focused on n=549 Cittaslow and non-Cittaslow towns and cities in 19 European countries. Rural towns offer more local gastronomy than cities, and Cittaslow-certified towns more than non-Cittaslow. All rural towns should focus on expanding their local gastronomy, and Cittaslow cities even more so.

Keywords: Local gastronomy, rural destinations, Cittaslow

Introduction

Empirical data is still lacking, but anecdotal information and first industry reports suggest that the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic increases rural tourism for years to come (Deloitte, 2020). With international travel at a complete standstill and borders closed, domestic trips and vacations are, for many, the only viable travel alternatives. Rural destinations are perceived as safer than urban centers, contributing to travelers flocking to the country site. For 2019, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) reported a record 1.5 billion international arrivals (United Nations World Travel Organization [UNWTO], 2020) and was predicting another record-setting year for 2020. Yet, losses in the tourism and hospitality industries for 2020 are expected to top \$450 billion in the USA alone (US Travel Association, 2020). Rural domestic tourism, usually a niche market, found itself at the center of public interest and showed growth in 2020, buffering the decline in international travel due to the Coronavirus.

Traditionally, rural communities have had limited economic development options leading them to embrace all forms of rural tourism as economic development tools supporting their long-term strategies (Wilson et al., 2001). As Cromartie and Bucholtz (2008) have posited, rural destinations, particularly in developed countries, provide urban tourists with scenic escapes that offer relaxation and a chance to slow down from urban life. Western tourists have become disillusioned with mass tourism and its adverse impacts on destinations (Redstrom, 2014) and seek out rural places with unspoiled environments and 'lived' cultural heritage (Hall et al., 2005). Travelers seek slow tourism (Lowry & Lee, 2001) with authentic experiences that allow them to connect with local cultures in pristine environments (Hatipoglu, 2015; Sims, 2009). In general, rural communities can meet the increasing traveler-demand for safe, relaxing, and authentic experiences and have positioned themselves to cater to all types of travel encompassed in rural tourism, including agro-tourism, eco-tourism, food, and gastronomy tourism, health and wellness tourism, heritage and adventure tourism, and sustainability tourism (Sims, 2009). The literature supports that a sustained

rural environment establishes a destination's competitiveness (Popescu et al., 2014) and creates sustainable competitive advantages (Cucculelli & Goffi, 2016). Yet, with the increased pressures stemming from growing tourist numbers, the rural destinations need to stay authentic and sustain their 'ruralness' to remain attractive for all forms of rural tourism (Rang, 2014).

For rural destination development, local gastronomy is essential for authentic experiences and destination-specific memories for the visitors. The local gastronomy shapes travelers' images of the destination and impacts the overall experience of the tourist who seeks a sense of place (Renke et al., 2010; Sims, 2009). Furthermore, local gastronomy meets increasing customer demand for authentic and sustainable gastronomy (Withiam, 2011). The UNWTO states that sustainable tourism development needs viable local gastronomy (United Nations [UN], 2017). The UN (2017) highlights in this context the importance of local food organizations like Eurotoques and SlowFood for sustainable rural tourism development.

While the literature agrees on the importance of local gastronomy for rural tourism and overall rural development, little hard data is available about the actual number of local restaurants in rural destinations and differences to local gastronomy in urban centers. As an exploratory study, this research focused on evidence of local gastronomy in multiple European countries. Findings help decision-makers assess the presence of local gastronomy and steer efforts to improve its role in rural tourism and regional economic development.

Literature Review

The literature agrees that rural tourism encompasses all tourism to and in rural areas and that it is a multidimensional construct with different definitions depending upon agency and program foci. A universal definition for "rural" has not yet been established. Cromartie and Bucholtz (2008) outline how United States federal agencies have used almost two dozen reports of rural depending on the agency and purpose of a given program. They also posit that the definition widely varies between developed and developing countries. Widely accepted is the spatial distance from more easily defined urban areas and a threshold population level between 500 and 50,000 inhabitants for rural communities.

Lane (1994) already lamented that very few places collected data for the impact of rural tourism, partially because of distinct types of tourism using rural destinations. An exception, VisitEngland (2014) quantified the economic impact of domestic rural tourism in the United Kingdom. For 2014, 17.1 million domestic trips to the countryside were recorded, accounting for 17% of all domestic travel. The data revealed that tourists stayed longer for rural vacations than for visits to urban destinations (5%) but showed slightly lower spending than urban holidays (-3.8%). Rang (2014) reports that rural tourism accounts for 10% of rural businesses and 17% of employment in England, often also bringing new entrepreneurship to the countryside. Rang (2014) estimates Euro 100 million in direct spending by rural tourists in Europe.

Rural communities have limited economic development options leading them to embrace tourism as an economic development tool (Popescu & Badita, 2011; Popescu et al., 2014). Tourism development in rural areas provides a chance for economic development in communities that lack other economic opportunities and face decline (Shen et al., 2008; Wilson et al., 2001). Tourism promises to transform agrarian-based economies into more diversified and sustainable ones (Gannon, 1994). Shen et al. (2008) posited that rural tourism creates business opportunities that slow urban flight and reduce poverty by providing work in these new businesses. Popescu and

Badita (2011) describe how rural tourism provides economic development opportunities in rural parts of Romania. Similar studies from other countries, including China (Gao et al., 2009), Cyprus (Sharply, 2002) and southeastern Europe (Hall, 2004), among others, reported positive impacts.

Lane (1994) stressed the strong tie between rural tourism and sustainability efforts. Tourists are escaping their urban environments for a rural setting that promises scenic, pristine, and unspoiled nature combined with authentic local culture and heritage for resting, relaxing, and general slowing down of their daily lives (Graft, 2019; Sims, 2009). Cucculelli and Goffi (2016) have documented that focusing on sustainability leads to competitive advantages for rural destinations. The UNWTO recognized the importance of sustainable tourism and declared 2017 the 'Year of Sustainable Tourism Development' and advanced 17 sustainability goals for its 2030 sustainability agenda to eradicate poverty, help to protect the environment, and achieve global prosperity (UN, 2017).

The Cittaslow label is an alternative concept focusing on the development of rural towns following sustainability principles. The brand was started in 1999 in Orvieto, Italy, to promote a holistic, sustainable tourism approach for cities of up to 50,000 inhabitants. Its system integrates tourists' and locals' needs for a healthy environment providing a high quality of life (Hatipoglu, 2015; Miele, 2008; Presenza et al., 2015). Cittaslow (2020) posits that tourists and locals can coexist in the same town. The literature underpins that Cittaslow has contributed directly to rural towns' tourism (Popescu & Badita, 2011; Presenza et al., 2015; Yurtseven & Kaya, 2011). Cittaslow encourages grass-roots involvement and empowers locals to reject mass tourism that would exceed the carrying capacity of the destination, negatively affecting the environment and its residents (Knox, 2005; Park & Kim, 2016). Cittaslow principles provide the framework and guidelines member towns follow to achieve sustainability (Presenza et al., 2015; Redstrom, 2014).

Tourism development efforts over the last decades focused on increasing the number of arrivals. The travel industry saw unparalleled growth in international arrivals from 25 million arrivals in 1950 to over 680 million in 2000, 952 million in 2010, and a record of 1.5 billion in 2019 (UNWTO, 2020), leading to 'overtourism' in some destinations (Seraphin et al., 2018). These developments suggest that "Tourism today has a problem. It is addicted to growth, which is incompatible with sustainability goals. The growth fetish is resulting in tourism killing tourism" (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018, p.157). This growth focus wrongly suggested that mass tourism would lead to economic success and economic sustainability (UN, 2017). Instead, mass tourism has led to indiscriminate and unplanned growth in destinations and advanced social and environmental degradation in destinations (e.g., Benidorm, Spain), highlighting the importance of sustainability in the development of destinations balancing economic, ecological, and socio-cultural sustainability (Furquan et al., 2010). The focus on growth has left locals behind and undermined long-term economic sustainability efforts, particularly in rural destinations (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018; Korez-Vide, 2013).

Graft (2019) reported that 34% of travelers want to have locally relevant experiences and increasingly shy away from mass-tourism destinations instead of looking for authentic experiences in rural settings. These tourists are interested in connecting with a locale's culture and its heritage (Knox, 2005; Sims, 2009) and are motivated to select a destination by its gastronomy (Perez Galvez et al., 2021). Furthermore, they seek to engage with a place's uniqueness while rejecting globalization's homogenizing effects (Servon & Pink, 2015; Yurtseven & Kaya, 2011). These individual rather than group travelers (Sharply, 2002) travel primarily by car in search of the authentic rural experience (VisitEngland, 2014). Rural tourism has embraced this individual tourism to set itself apart from long-haul mass tourism (Korez-Vide, 2013).

In general, local gastronomy refers to food preparation in eateries that represents the cuisine of a national culture or a region. The food preparation follows traditional recipes or uses new interpretations of local cuisine. It may or may not source ingredients locally or feature organic products. Empirical data to support the broader presence of local gastronomy in different national cultures is lacking, and anecdotally it is supported that some national cuisines permeate their home countries and enjoy global popularity (e.g., Italian). In contrast, others are restricted to a country (e.g., Icelandic, Polish) and are not prominent.

Graft (2019) reports that 55% of travelers seek to learn something about a place, culture, and history, 35% want to try local delicacies, and 34% want to have locally relevant experiences on their trips. As Kutschera (2018) states, "They want to do what locals do and eat where locals eat" (p.1). Local gastronomy attracts this growing segment of tourists who want local cuisine ideally made with locally sourced ingredients and prepared in traditional ways (Iskan, 2021; Renke et al., 2010; Sahin, 2015). Frash Jr. et al. (2015) affirm that guests can and are willing to pay more for local food and that local gastronomy will attract guests who have the economic means to pay for local cuisine. Furthermore, Singal (2013) reports that serving local food is profitable for those restaurants which choose to offer it. Withiam (2011) suggests that visitors want restaurants to operate more sustainably and provide more local cuisine. SlowFood labeled restaurants, for example, promote local food and traditional cooking in authentic local gastronomy (Miele, 2008), meeting travelers' demand for restaurants that operate in a more sustainable local environment (Singal, 2013; Withiam, 2011). Aybek and Alphan (2021) warn that authenticity is not a single concept but is defined by each customer's perception and taste.

Sims (2009) posits that local food plays a substantial role in the tourism experience by connecting with the locality. Renke et al. (2010) and the UNTWO (2017) see local gastronomy as a critical precondition for rural tourism development. Local gastronomy enhances the overall travel experience for the traveler by connecting the gastronomy of the region with the travelers' desire to immerse themselves (Hussain et al., 2012; Kutschera, 2018; Redstrom, 2014; Yurtseven & Kaya, 2011). Gastronomy impacts the travelers' image of the destination by enhancing the tourist's overall sense of place (Broadway, 2015; Hussain et al., 2012; Pink, 2008). Gastronomy offering regional cuisine with regionally sourced ingredients highly correlates with future repeat visits and recommendations to potential travelers in the future (Renke et al., 2010; Sahin, 2015).

The UNWTO (2017) has recognized the importance of local gastronomy and states in its mission to "incorporate gastronomy as a key resource in sustainable tourism development..." (p.17). A UNWTO (2017) study of key decision-makers in the tourism industry reveals that 87% of all participants believe that gastronomy is a distinctive and strategic element that impacts the image and brand recognition. On a 10-point scale with ten signaling the highest agreement, an 8.19 score suggested that gastronomy has been considered a driving force of tourism development (UNWTO, 2017). The UNWTO (2017) report highlights the importance of gastronomy networks that promote culinary traditions and local food use. The UNTWO mentions organizations like Eurotoques and Slow Food for their critical role in promoting tourism to rural destinations and as an alternative to corporate-centered developments in the global restaurant industry (Semmens & Freeman, 2012).

The Cittaslow label has developed from the SlowFood movement to protect the local environment, heritage, and culture (Mayer & Knox, 2006). Cittaslow has embraced slow tourism and SlowFood as critical aspects for alternative urban planning promoting quality of life for locals and authentic experiences for travelers (Hatipoglu, 2015; Mayer & Knox, 2006; Yurtseven & Kaya, 2011). The Cittaslow goals include collaboration to promote natural and traditional food offerings (Cittaslow,

2020). Macro area no. 7 of Cittaslow objectives links directly to traditional and natural food, making local food and traditional local cuisine in local gastronomy essential to developing an integrated destination. Cittaslow promotes traditional local production with short distribution chains, regional markets including farmers' markets, and regional food networks for direct sales to enhance customer awareness of local ingredients and cuisine (Cittaslow, 2012). Cittaslow objectives suggest that quality local gastronomy is critical for developing wholesome destinations. Restaurants that use traditional cuisine ingredients typical and natural to the region support local food networks and shorten distribution channels.

The literature highlights the importance of local gastronomy for rural destinations and their economic sustainability. Based on the literature, this study posits the following four research questions:

1. Is there evidence of local gastronomy in rural communities?
2. Do Cittaslow and Non-Cittaslow rural destinations differ in the number of local gastronomies?
3. Do rural and urban destinations differ in the number of local gastronomies?
4. Are there differences in the number of local gastronomies among the different countries?

The author expects the findings to provide empirical data as a basis for recommendations to decision-makers in rural destinations to assess their local culinary offerings and encourage and promote local gastronomy to the destinations' benefit.

Methods

The Covid-19 epidemic in 2020 stopped field research in Europe, so the author used archival research to answer the research questions regarding local gastronomy. Exploratory in nature, the study describes evidence of local gastronomy without the goal to generalize the results and wants to provide a database for future research and decision-makers in rural destinations.

Purposeful non-probability sampling started with a list of Cittaslow communities in Europe (N=200), of which n=183 (91.5%) were included in the sample. With the help of hardcopy maps, GoogleMaps, Wikipedia entries, and community websites, each Cittaslow community was paired with a comparable size town and the closest large urban center in the same region/province to ensure similar tourism environments. The sample included n=549 towns and cities in 19 European countries.

The author reviewed TripAdvisor restaurant sites for information about restaurants serving local cuisine in a second step. The author chose TripAdvisor over Yelp and Google, as it has data for all selected towns, and it was the most current with May and June 2020 updates. The author cross-checked the data obtained from TripAdvisor with restaurant sites and respective national restaurant guides where this was possible.

The author screened data for correctness and entered it into an IBM SPSS-26 spreadsheet for descriptive statistics and comparative analysis. Tests for normality (Kurtosis of 2.111) and unequal group sizes suggested the use of non-parametric statistics, while the related-sample Wilcoxon non-parametric tests described differences among two paired samples. Friedman's two-way Analysis of Variance with pairwise comparison was used to test for differences for paired multiple samples.

The researcher followed scientific research standards and upheld ethical standards at every step of this research.

Findings

Appendix A summarizes essential background information for the n=549 towns and cities included in the study, 183 each of Cittaslow-certified and non-Cittaslow small towns, and cities in the 19 included countries. The Cittaslow towns have on average 11,164 inhabitants, which compares with 11,498 for paired non-Cittaslow towns, and 290,186 citizens in the paired cities. The size of the villages varies significantly. The Cittaslow village of Bubion in Spain has 302 inhabitants, while Perth in the UK has 46,960. The included rural towns in Iceland have on average only 426 citizens, and those in France have only 1,914 citizens. In contrast, included rural towns in Denmark have an average population of 33,271. Notable is the concentration of Cittaslow communities in certain areas and regions of some countries. For example, the region of Warmian-Masurian in Poland is home to 22 of the country's 31 Cittaslow towns (71%). The average distance between Cittaslow and non-Cittaslow towns is 32.5 miles, and urban centers are 28.6 and 32.2 miles away from Cittaslow and non-Cittaslow towns, respectively. Still, distances range from 0.5 to 130 miles and are most significant in sparsely populated northern Europe (e.g., Finland, Iceland, Norway). The similar distances support that the paired rural towns and cities are in the same regions of the respective countries.

Research Question #1 addressed the overall evidence of local gastronomy in the sampled rural communities. The n=366 rural towns have on average 24.6 restaurants, and of these, 16.4 (66.7%) offer local gastronomy. The correlation coefficient between town size and the number of restaurants ($r=.170$) and local gastronomy restaurants ($r=-.130$) is weak and not significant. In 68 of 366 towns (18.6%), restaurants serve local food, and 41 of these 68 (60.3%) restaurants are located in towns with fewer than 3,000 inhabitants. As Table 1 shows, in Italy, Turkey, and France, a high concentration of local gastronomy is found in rural towns (89.3%, 77.8%, and 73.9%, respectively), while it is low in Belgium (49.6%) and Germany (39.5%). Regarding the presence of American-style fast-food, the data reveals that only 45 of 366 (12.3%) rural towns are home to these types of restaurants. The threshold for American-Style fast-food restaurants in these European countries seems to be 10,000 inhabitants. Small rural towns in France, Italy, Poland, and Turkey have the fewest US-style fast-food restaurants, while they account for the majority in Germany and the UK. Overall, the data suggest that rural towns show a significant level of local gastronomy. Two out of three rural town restaurants (66.7%) offer local gastronomy and limited fast-food chain options.

The higher percentages of local gastronomy in the n=366 rural towns suggest that these restaurants see sufficient demand for local cuisine. A homogeneous rural population might drive demand but might also result from traveler demand for authentic food experiences in rural settings. These findings are consistent with the literature, which suggests that tourists to small rural towns seek authenticity, and that cuisine is an essential part and access point for visitors who want to experience 'local' (Hussain et al., 2012; Sahin, 2015; Sims, 2009). Tourists want to experience the rural culture and are willing to consume and pay for local gastronomy, ideally using locally grown ingredients or sourced products (Singal, 2013; Withiam, 2011). The local gastronomy impacts the image and brand of the whole town in the tourist's mind (Popescu & Badita, 2011; Renke et al., 2010). The study's results suggest that small and rural towns have enough local gastronomy to drive their economies and local food networks, agreeing with findings advanced by Sahin (2015) and Singal (2013). A 66.7% average of local gastronomy suggests that rural towns have a

substantial level of local gastronomy that supports rural tourism (Renke et al., 2010). The example of Italy, France, and Turkey shows that even higher percentages are possible and sustainable. Currently, substantial local gastronomy is evident, but the challenge will be to remain authentically local under pressure from increasing tourism (Rang, 2014).

The higher-than-average evidence of local gastronomy in small Italian (89.3%), Turkish (77.8%), and French (73.9%) towns indicates a preference for local fare by locals and tourists alike. In France and Italy, the cultural appreciation for full, often family, sit-down dinners enjoying national and local food explains the strong presence of local gastronomy. The findings suggest that visitors to France and Italy also seek out eateries serving local fare. They want to experience the local eating tradition as indicated by the secondary literature (Popescu & Badita, 2011; Renke et al., 2010). The higher percentage of local gastronomy in sampled Italian (81.3%), Turkish (67.2%), and French (55.2) cities reflects the strong appeal of the culinary traditions that appeal to locals and tourists alike. Visitors to France and Italy want to experience these global cuisines in their local settings, and tourists seek French and Italian food experiences when visiting both countries. The cultural preference in both countries for multiple-course sit-down dinners seems to appeal to tourists who have the time and leisure to enjoy extended dinners while on vacation. Cities in the other 16 countries in the sample see a significantly lower percentage of restaurants serving local cuisine (36.9%). More diverse populations favor their ethnic gastronomy, and locals seek international food experiences after travel experiences. It is also trendy among locals to select ethnic over domestic food in many countries. Also, the national cuisines do not hold the broad global appeal that French and Italian food enjoys among visitors. The international status of national cuisine and eating culture seems to impact the prevalence of local gastronomy in different countries. Urban centers see many diverse tourists, who often seek their home cuisine while traveling, and local food experiences are secondary to sightseeing and other activities.

Given that Cittaslow and SlowFood are related concepts, local gastronomy in Cittaslow versus Non-Cittaslow towns was central to Research Question #2. This objective set out to investigate if Cittaslow-certified towns ($n=183$) have higher levels of local gastronomy than the paired non-Cittaslow rural towns ($n=183$) across all 19 countries. Towns in both groups have roughly the same number of restaurants (24.6 versus 24.5 per town, respectively). Still, in Cittaslow-certified cities in the 19 countries, 17.0 or 69.3% offer local gastronomy compared with 15.7 or 64.0% in non-Cittaslow ones. The Wilcoxon non-parametric test for related samples shows a statistically significant difference ($p<0.05$) between both samples across all 19 countries. This result suggests that Cittaslow-certified towns have a statistically significantly higher percentage of local gastronomy than the rural non-Cittaslow towns (Table 1). The author ran Wilcoxon tests for the nine countries with more than ten towns in the sample and found statistically significant differences in local gastronomy at the 0.05 level between the 169 Cittaslow-certified and 169 non-Cittaslow towns. While the difference across all nine countries is at the 0.05 level, only Italy and Germany show significantly higher numbers of local gastronomy in Cittaslow towns ($p<0.05$). Concerning US-style fast-food restaurants, the villages also differ. In Cittaslow towns, 19 of 183 (10.4%) eateries are US-style fast-food restaurants, while these account for 26 of 183 (14.2%) restaurants in non-Cittaslow towns. Table 1 summarizes the results for the 19 countries in the sample and highlights the nine countries with more than ten towns in the sample for levels of and differences in local gastronomy between Cittaslow and non-Cittaslow towns.

Table 1. The difference in Local Gastronomy (LocGast) between towns

Country (towns in study)	% LocGast in	% LocGast in	% LocGast in	% LocGast
	Cittaslow (n=183)	non-Cittaslow (n=183)	Rural Towns (n=366)	in Cities (n=183)
Italy (n=159)	91.1	87.4*	89.3**	81.3
Turkey (n=54)	76.7	78.8	77.8***	67.2
France (n=30)	73.8	73.9	73.9***	55.2
Netherlands (n=33)	64.0	62.4	60.2**	45.5
Poland (n=93)	63.5	57.5	60.5**	38.8
Spain (n=27)	61.7	52.1	57.0	34.5
UK (n=15)	56.7	47.0	51.9	38.8
Belgium (n=21)	48.7	49.6	49.2***	34.5
Germany (n=63)	44.4	34.5*	39.5**	26.7
Subtotal	71.1%	66.7%*	69.2%**	55.0%
Portugal (n=12)	48.4	36.4	42.4	27.7
Austria (n=9)	54.6	42.5	48.6	34.7
Norway (n=9)	64.6	40.5	52.6	30.0
Denmark (n=6)	24.7	25.3	25.0	36.8
Finland (n=3)	9.2	9.6	9.4	41.0
Hungary (n=3)	60.0	33.3	46.7	57.0
Iceland (n=3)	100.0	100.0	100.0	38.5
Ireland (n=3)	79.4	25.0	52.2	47.3
Sweden (n=3)	28.1	27.3	27.7	31.7
Switzerland (n=3)	77.5	78.6	78.1	26.5
TOTAL	69.3%	64.0%*	66.7%**	52.9%

*Cittaslow and non-Cittaslow statistically significantly different at 0.05 level;

** Rural towns and Cities statistically significantly different at 0.01 level; *** different at 0.05 level

The data in Table 1 shows that Cittaslow towns across the sample seem to follow the Cittaslow organization's guidelines to offer local food in their communities (Cittaslow, 2020). Italian (91.1%), Turkish (76.7%), and French (73.8%) Cittaslow towns report the highest percentages of local gastronomy, while German (44.4%) and Belgian (48.7%) towns report the lowest ones.

Interestingly, Italy, Turkey, and France also showed the highest percentages of local gastronomy in non-Cittaslow towns. Unexpectedly, in a few of the sampled countries, local gastronomy is more prevalent in non-Cittaslow towns, including in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Switzerland, and Turkey. Cittaslow should encourage certified towns to encourage more restaurants serving local fare to gain competitive advantages over non-Cittaslow towns in these countries. Also, small rural towns in Finland, Denmark, and Sweden have little local gastronomy (9.4%, 25.0%, and 27.7%, respectively). The national cuisines of all three countries might not hold a strong global appeal for tourists, plus the expensive local kitchen is more often offered in urban centers (41.0%, 36.8%, and 31.7%, respectively) to a more sizable number of affluent locals and visitors.

In answer to Research Question #2, the included Cittaslow-certified towns are home to more local gastronomy than comparable non-Cittaslow towns. The label stands for more local gastronomy and needs to be marketed to drive tourist brand and image perception. Before the Coronavirus stopped the fieldwork in Spring 2020, the author visited one Cittaslow town in Germany and Switzerland and noticed that the villages did not actively advertise the Cittaslow label or their local gastronomy.

Research Question #3 explores differences between rural towns and the paired closest urban centers. Across all rural villages, on average, 16.4 of 24.5 (66.3%) restaurants offer local gastronomy, compared with 326.7 of 561.2 (58.2%) in urban centers. This difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), supporting that those rural towns have higher ratios of local gastronomy. Considering data for the nine countries with ten or more restaurants in the sample (Table 1), seven show significant differences between local gastronomy in rural towns and cities. Still, for two countries, Spain (57.0% versus 34.5%) and the UK (51.9% versus 38.8%), no significant difference in the number of restaurants serving local cuisine was found between rural towns and cities.

Scandinavian countries have only a few towns and cities in the sample. Still, in the three countries, the sampled cities have more restaurants serving local fare than the rural towns: Denmark (25.0% versus 36.8%), Finland (9.4% versus 41.0%), and Sweden (27.7% versus 31.7%). These three, plus Hungary (46.7% versus 57.0%), are the only countries in the study for which this holds. As stated above, expensive local cuisine in the Scandinavian countries drives the need for a more extensive customer base of well-to-do locals and tourists in cities. Cities in Hungary see large numbers of tourists (e.g., Budapest), who might seek and can pay for local food. A significant difference was seen in the number of American-style fast-food restaurants in rural towns and cities. Of the Cittaslows, 10.4% have American-style fast-food compared with 14.2% of the non-Cittaslows, and 91.3% of cities (167 of 183). Denmark, Germany, Norway, and the UK account for most fast-food restaurants in rural towns, while there are very few in rural France, Italy, Poland, and Turkey.

The secondary literature suggests that local gastronomy is essential to the tourists' search for authenticity in rural destinations (Hussain et al., 2012; Sahin, 2015; Sims, 2009). It drives the success of rural tourism (Renke et al., 2010). Local food plays a vital role in the tourists' experiences (Sims, 2009). The image and brand of the town in the visitor's mind depend primarily on the local gastronomy (Popescu & Badita, 2011). Hence the higher percentage of local gastronomy. For the most part, cities do not seem to depend on local food to establish brand and image from visitor experiences. They offer numerous other ways to imprint in the tourists' perceptions including, sightseeing, shopping, and entertainment. Cities often host larger

international groups that demand their home cuisine when traveling (e.g., food trucks following Chinese and Indian tour groups in Europe).

In all, the answer to Research Question #3 suggests that rural towns in the sample show a higher number of local gastronomy than cities. In line with the secondary literature, rural towns are home to local food eateries that meet the tourists' demands for truly authentic experiences. Cities are not home to as many eateries serving local cuisine but do not depend on local gastronomy to the same extent.

Research Question #4 focuses on differences in local gastronomy between the different countries in the sample. Only the nine countries with more than ten towns and cities in the sample are included (Table 1). Friedman's two-way Analysis of Variance resulted in no significant differences among the nine countries for the Cittaslow ($p=0.144$) and non-Cittaslow ($p=0.229$) towns. Yet, significant differences are tested for urban centers ($p=0.003$). Italian cities show the highest percentage of restaurants serving local cuisine (81.3%) and differ from five of the nine countries: Belgium (34.5%, $p=0.000$), Germany (26.7%, $p=0.001$), Spain (34.5%, $p=0.002$), Poland (38.8%, $p=0.011$), and the UK (38.3%, $p=0.011$). Turkey shows the second-highest number of local gastronomy in cities (67.2%) and is significantly different from Belgium (34.5%, $p=0.011$) and Germany (26.7%, $p=0.038$). France has the third-highest percentage of local gastronomy in cities (55.2%) and differs from Belgium (34.5%, $p=0.011$) and Germany (26.7%, $p=0.038$). The Netherlands has the fourth-highest percentage of local gastronomy in cities (45.5%) and differs significantly from Belgium (34.5%, $p=0.050$).

Table 1 documents that Italy has the highest percentage of local gastronomy across all three types of towns (91.1%, 87.4%, 81.3%, respectively). Not surprising as it is home to the SlowFood and Cittaslow movements. Additionally, Italian cuisine is genuinely global, dominating the gastronomy offerings in many countries with Italian and Pizza restaurants. Locals prefer their Italian food and tourists associate visits to Italy with Italian food experiences. The same holds for Turkey (76.7%, 78.8%, and 67.2%), and France (73.8%, 73.9%, and 55.2%), the countries with the highest number of restaurants serving local fare. French food is global, and tourists seek the classical French dining experience. Turks also seem to favor their local cuisine at home, and Kebab restaurants are widely spread throughout Europe. There appears to be a connection between the international brand recognition of local cuisine and the number of restaurants that offer it domestically. Locals demand this food, and for tourists, it is an essential part of the experience to eat locally.

The Scandinavian countries of Finland (9.2%, 9.6%, 41.0%), Denmark (24.7%, 25.3%, 36.8%), and Sweden (28.1%, 27.3%, 31.7%) have the lowest percentages of local gastronomy across all three types of towns but have few towns and cities in the sample. Among countries with multiple towns and cities in the sample, German towns and cities have by far the lowest percentage of local gastronomy (44.4%, 34.5%, 26.7%). All these countries do not seem to have a solid global cuisine or have seen demand for it around the globe diminish. From the author's fieldwork, restaurants offering local food in Scandinavia tend to be high-priced, and even locals prefer less expensive options like Pizza or Kebab restaurants. The global appeal of the local cuisine and the price point seem to impact the level of local gastronomy within a national culture.

The overall answer to Research Question #4 is that differences in local gastronomy across the sampled countries exist. With well-known global cuisines and dining experiences, Italy, France, and Turkey show a higher presence of local gastronomy than countries like Denmark, Finland,

Germany, and Sweden, which lack a robust global cuisine. In Scandinavian countries, the price of local food is also exceedingly high.

Conclusions

For overall conclusion, the data from this study support that smaller rural towns are home to more local gastronomy than cities in the same region. In line with the literature and predictions that domestic tourism will increase immediately after the Corona epidemic (Deloitte, 2020), small town should continue to support the local gastronomy that the visitors seek. The practical implications are that rural towns should actively market their local gastronomy, make it the center or at least part of their promotional materials. The restaurant operators should be encouraged to develop local cuisine and establish a local food and dining experience based on locally sourced ingredients and local culinary traditions. Efforts in this way support towns' local food network and, in that way, the whole local economy. Increased rural tourism provides opportunities to gain experience and the challenge to keep the authenticity of the locale and its gastronomy. Only authentic experiences will attract visitors and encourage positive word-of-mouth advertising (Hatipoglu, 2015; Sims, 2009).

The study shows that Cittaslow certified towns are home to more restaurants serving local cuisine, but overall, all small rural destinations show significant evidence of local gastronomy. They all should promote their local gastronomy to aid local rural tourism development. Small towns can enhance economic, ecological, and socio-cultural sustainability by featuring local dishes, sustaining local food traditions, and positioning themselves for long-term tourism development. Small rural destinations should strive to maintain elevated levels of local gastronomy to stay competitive, attracting tourists who seek experiences in wholesome towns. Rural towns should encourage local restaurant operators to offer local cuisine and keep fast-food chains out to distinguish themselves from urban areas. They need to market their local gastronomy more actively and strengthen its connection to overall tourism promotion. Cittaslow-certified town officials should emphasize local gastronomy to gain competitive advantages over non-Cittaslow towns. If non-Cittaslow towns offer more local gastronomy than Cittaslow ones, it does not bode well for the label. Tourists choosing to travel to Cittaslow-certified towns expect local gastronomy.

As the last conclusion, significant differences exist among the sampled countries. Not all countries benefit from a solid national cuisine and eating culture like France and Italy, which are favored by locals and tourists alike. Yet, with the predicted growth of domestic travel and rural tourism, local authorities and F&B industry operators should find strategies to increase the presence of local gastronomy and make it a substantial part of their marketing campaigns. In all these efforts, the rural destinations and their local gastronomy need to maintain their authenticity to guarantee long-term tourism sustainability.

This study succeeded in providing one of the first extensive empirical data sets about local gastronomy in small towns across numerous European countries. The extensive database adds to the current understanding of local gastronomy in small rural towns. Future studies can build on this evidence. The study outcome supports that Cittaslow certified towns are home to more local gastronomy than non-Cittaslow ones, but this aspect should be investigated in future research. The study results add to the understanding of the difference between local gastronomy in rural and urban setting and can be a starting point for future investigations. Lastly, this research provides a cross-cultural comparison that can provide a starting point for more in-dept investigations of the topic.

The researcher faced restrictions that future research should try to address and overcome. The data collection and sampling started with n=183 Cittaslow towns in 19 European countries. Future studies should include rural cities in other European countries and beyond Europe. Tourist arrival data for the cities should be included as outcome measures. During the Coronavirus pandemic, little information about overnights was forthcoming from the local tourism organizations in the small rural towns. Future studies might look at the type of non-local cuisines that dominate the different countries' gastronomies. Fast-food is evident in all the sampled countries. Yet, future studies might look at the evidence of local versus American-style fast-food providers.

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Appendix A: Summary Table for Communities in the Sample

Country	Cities in study (n=549)	Cittaslow population n (n=183)	Non-Cittaslow population (n=183)	Ave. Dis. Cittaslow to Non-Cittaslow (miles)	City Pop. (n=183)	Ave. Dis. Cittaslow to City (miles)	Ave. Dis. Non-Cittaslow to City (miles)
Italy	159	7,862	8,509	26.1	242,437	28.3	23.9
Poland	93	9,784	10,210	77.3	278,644	37.7	64.3
Germany	63	12,431	14,711	10.0	147,827	17.4	20.3
Turkey	54	12,358	10,613	29.2	957,154	35.9	34.6
Netherlands	33	22,188	21,443	12.4	246,706	12.7	16.5
France	30	1,940	1,887	12.8	58,525	19.4	22.5
Spain	27	9,816	11,911	20.7	449,093	29.2	26.8
Belgium	21	12,959	12,801	16.7	105,665	15.0	13.8
UK.	15	15,747	17,177	24.4	149,899	27.2	24.6
Portugal	12	27,666	26,201	30.0	97,455	23.5	32.0
Austria	9	8,235	9,439	15.5	232,927	34.0	19.0
Norway	9	8,175	7,582	77.0	210,889	63.7	64.7
Denmark	6	34,652	35,889	28.0	157,850	29.5	36.0
Finland	3	6,671	7,548	109.0	67,588	63.0	48.0
Hungary	3	46,047	28,059	18.0	168,048	16.0	33.0
Iceland	3	456	395	80.0	2,464	83.0	2.0
Ireland	3	4,592	5,080	43.0	208,669	33.0	10.0
Sweden	3	16,350	18,580	19.0	573,000	76.0	85.0
Switzerland	3	14,952	7,975	5.0	63,922	12.0	16.0
Total # Countries	Total # Towns	Ave.Pop. Cittaslow (n=183)	Ave.Pop. non-Citta (n=183)	Ave.Dis. Cittaslow to non-Cittalow	Ave.Pop. Cities (n=183)	Ave.Dis. Cittaslow to City	Ave.Dis non-Cittalow to City
19	549	11,164	11,498	32.5	290,186	28.6	32.2