COMMUNICATION OF GASTRONOMY ON ETC MEMBERS' OFFICIAL WEBSITES

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Cover: Three plates of lovely vegetarian Italian food on white plates on a table on a lovely outdoor terrace overlooking a beautiful, calm lake, with antique buildings and alpine mountains in the background
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an integral part of the "experience economy" (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) in which the engaging of the senses is crucial. As humans, we perceive what is around us through our senses. However, it was not until recently that the tourism agenda started to analyse human senses other than vision and consider them as necessary for a complete, holistic tourism experience.

The rise in interest in food tourism attractions at the destination coincides with the emergence of new ways of communicating and sharing experiences. The use of social media, websites and apps adds to the tourist's experience at the destination, allowing them to contribute to the development of the experience and to communicate it informally to their peers. Destinations are no longer the only ones that communicate their tourism offer, and now, they have to consider the existence and importance that informal communication channels have in addition to the official ones.

The goal of this study is to analyse the phenomenon of food (in) tourism as a whole and to examine how different countries communicate online the presence of food tourism attractions at the destination to prospect tourists. To this end, official tourism websites of ETC members will be analysed.

2. FOOD (IN) TOURISM

Enogastronomic activities are an example of multisensory experiences, given their engagement with all five basic human senses (vision, sound, touch, smell, taste). They lead to a lasting memory in the mind of the tourist.

Tasting is a vital aspect of the travel experience, whether or not the visitor is deliberately guided to it, during a trip he or she will have to come into touch at some stage with the culinary environment of the destination (Burstedt, 2002). Taste, and activities that include the use of taste as a sense (such as dining at a local restaurant or wine tasting) tend to impact the body more intensely than other senses, moving the emphasis from the visual sense to "actually tasting a place" (Kaaristo & Bardone, 2014, p. 206).

According to Quan and Wang (2004, p. 302) "food consumption can turn to be a peak touristic experience [and this] can be demonstrated by a newly emerging form of tourism, in which the major, sometimes even sole, motivation to tourism is the tastes of foods that are much more various, with a longer range of choices, and different from their daily reservoirs of foods". Food, and in general taste-based activities and experiences, can thus serve as an attraction element for destinations (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Quan & Wang, 2004).

Throughout the last decades the development and rising interest for local foodscapes and the connection between food and local culture have led to the need for more dedicated place branding, basing the narrative

not only on the more prevalent use of visual elements but also food/beverage-related branding and marketing.

In 2012 with its report on food tourism, the UNWTO carried out an analysis concluding that food and beverage tourism shifted from being a niche type of tourism to gradually gaining more interest from both academics and governments.

2.1. FOOD TOURISM AS CULTURAL TOURISM

The importance food tourism has for a place's identity, becomes explicitly clear when considered as part of a place's culture. In 2003, with the "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage", UNESCO defined Intangible Heritage as elements that "individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage" (Art. 2,1, UNESCO, 2003). Particularly relevant for gastronomy heritage are the following domains, listed in Art. 2,2: "(c) social practices, rituals and festive events" and "(e) traditional craftsmanship".

A place's identity – whether it is local, regional or national – is made up also of intangible elements, which include eating, drinking and cooking habits; because of its contribution in creating a place's identity, gastronomy can be considered as part of cultural heritage (Bessiere, 1998; Matta, 2013).

The connection that food and food practices have with the culture of a place, make it "typical" to a territory and "become sought-after commodities, which are consumed because of their alleged pedigrees" (Brulotte & Di Giovine, 2014, Chapter 3, p. 56).

The recognition of local food and related practices as part of a destination's culture and identity, together with the rising interest in local gastronomy in recent years created a new habit of buying typical products as souvenirs. Rather than limiting purchases to other non-perishable/non-edible objects, food as a souvenir can be used for special occasions or just to have a vivid memory of vacation once back at home.
Specifically, the phenomenon of the tourist's experience concerning food can be described considering three temporally distinct moments of the tourist experience:

1. **First gaze**: activity of the first contact of the tourist with local gastronomy;
2. **Second gaze**: the knowledgeable food tourist wants to experience gastronomy on a deeper level by visiting "backstage", namely with visits to producers;
3. **Third gaze**: or "virtual experience", is the act of buying local products to incorporate in everyday life as it is only found at the destination and is seen as a unique element (Vitterso & Amilien, 2011). Such products might be recognised as PDO (Protected Designation of Origin), meaning they can only be labelled as such if produced in a certain geographical area and with certain techniques – this is the case, for instance, of Champagne in France or Gorgonzola in Italy.

2.2. ONLINE COMMUNICATION OF FOOD TOURISM INFORMATION

Food and drink are strong components of the tourism industry, however, in a high number of countries it is not the core form of tourism but a supportive, niche one: it is, in fact, an intangible art that has been mainly transmitted through generations orally and is native to a place or a community that share its cultural relevance.

Because of its inherent features, food is a difficult element to communicate remotely - the taste of a drink or a typical dish cannot be transmitted digitally. Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs), however, can be a powerful tool to help food tourism in a destination grow into an essential role on both local and international levels enabling it to market its products online, benefitting both the producers and the consumers (Baggio et al., 2014; Surenkok et al., 2010).

The development of accessible and user-friendly ICTs has brought drastic changes in the communication practices. Online content is not coming only from businesses, but also is co-created by and with consumers through User Generated Content (UGC) and Media (UGM) (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Silva, Mahfujur Rahman, & El Saddik, 2008; Tardini & Cantoni, 2015).

UGC and UGM are the result of experiences customers have had with products and services at the destination, and as such cannot be controlled from organisations and businesses once the experience is over. Their comments, either positive or negative, have a great impact on prospect tourists when in the pre-travel phase of their travel experience (Cantoni, Fedele, & Ascaniis, 2010).

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to carry out this research and gather data, a content analysis method was used, in order to categorise gastronomy-related content available on tourism websites. A major benefit that derives from the use of content analysis as a research method is its replicability, meaning that once the data has been categorised and coded, results can be duplicated by other researchers to test their truthfulness (Krippendorff, 1989; Stemler, 2001). The content analysis method used comprises a total of 4 parts:

1. **Sampling**: choice of sample group to analyse;

2. **Identifying categories:** thanks to previous research on food tourism, a framework was designed consisting of a series of umbrella categories where the main topic of analysis is identified. Subsequently smaller, and more specific indicators (subcategories) are recognised, which help with classifying different types of information according to the different positioning, themes, etc. (See Table 1).

3. **Coding:** Each piece of information gathered was coded according to their presence on the website's different pages: every time information was present it was recorded as "1" on an Excel Sheet, while the absence of the information would match a value "0".

4. **Results and analysis:** data was analysed using a per-category approach.

This research was performed in February 2020 on the websites of the European Travel Commission's members[1]. In total, 35 websites[2] were analysed (see Annex 1 for the complete list). The language in which the websites were analysed was English.

In order to correctly and systematically code the information gathered, a list of categories and sub-categories had been designed beforehand and adjusted during the content analysis exercise.

Table 1 displays the final framework used to perform content analysis and coding of information on the 35 websites. Specifically, the 5 main categories are:

- **Location:** describing where the information about local gastronomy is placed on the website, whether it is on the homepage, in dedicated pages, articles, etc.;

- **Format:** in which format information about local gastronomy is introduced to web visitors; specifically, "format" refers to the type of multimedia used to communicate to visitors in a way that suits the object that needs to be communicated. Texts, pictures and videos are the first to come to mind when communicating remotely, however, other formats can be used, such as brochures or logos/icons to state the presence of information. On most websites many of these types of media are used together;

- **Type of section:** in which specific section (if ever) local food is located on the website. The majority of websites have a specific section for every element of their tourism offer, this category was specifically designed to understand what are those sections and where gastronomy is placed as an offer – whether it is an attraction of its own, e.g. if it is part of a UNESCO heritage section, regarded as an experience at the destination, and so on;

- **Topics:** the largest category of "topic" focuses on defining the topics covered in the sections that communicate local gastronomy information. This section includes all the different topics related to local gastronomy that are present on a destination's website;

- **Message:** The last category focuses on the type of information. Through the use of multimedia ("format"), information can be shared differently; it can be more general information or in depth and detailed, testimonial endorsement, picture slideshow or video storytelling, all can be tools to communicate a message to prospect visitors.

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[1] The official website of the European Travel Commission can be found at the link: https://etc-corporate.org/our-members/
[2] Out of the 35 analysed websites, 3 are not registered as ETC members, namely: Austria, Northern Ireland and Brussels.

Table 1. List of used content Categories and Subcategories

Categories	Location	Format	Type of section	Topic	Message
S u b c a t e g o r i e s	Entire website	Text	Attraction/Activity	Traditional culture / heritage	General description
	Homepage	Picture	Food & Drink / Gastronomy	History	In depth information
	Dedicated page	Video	Events	UNESCO Heritage	Testimonial / celebrity endorsement
	Dedicated external link	Logo / icon	Culture	Recipes	Picture slideshow/gallery
	Article	E-brochure	UNESCO heritage	Culinary trails	Video storytelling
	App/widget		Places to visit	Famous chefs	
			Things to do/ Experiences	Typical dishes / drinks	
			Arts & crafts	Restaurants / bars to visit	
			Other	Reviews	
				Type of cuisine	
				Local involvement	
				Relevant events / festivals	

4. RESULTS

To analyse the trend in communication of gastronomy-related information concerning ETC members' official tourism websites, a per-category approach was chosen. For this approach the results collected through the content analysis are clustered per category, allowing the presentation of the overall picture.

4.1. LOCATION AND FORMAT

Local gastronomy is always present in some form or another across the 35 websites analysed.
Although the majority of countries consider local food and drink as a cultural element, these are not represented as a main tourism product of the destinations. Elements related to food tourism are present overall, covering different topics and with different media and level of depth, but on the majority of websites food tourism is not valued as a separate type of tourism or presented as a valuable alternative to other types of tourism (e.g. adventure tourism, historical tourism, etc.).

It must be acknowledged that gastronomy elements are harder to convey to tourists in the pre-travel phase because of the core essence food and drinks have – one must taste and smell them, and experience them first-hand in order to connect with them. However, the use of multimedia in many websites has helped in online communication of such intangible elements. The extensive use of videos and pictures, together with the integration of storytelling items help in triggering tourists' interest in local gastronomy.

4.2. TOPICS

The topics covered on each website on the area dedicated to local gastronomy (whether it is the homepage, a dedicated page, articles, brochures, etc.) are analysed below.

Figure 1. Topics covered in destination's food related pages (35 websites)
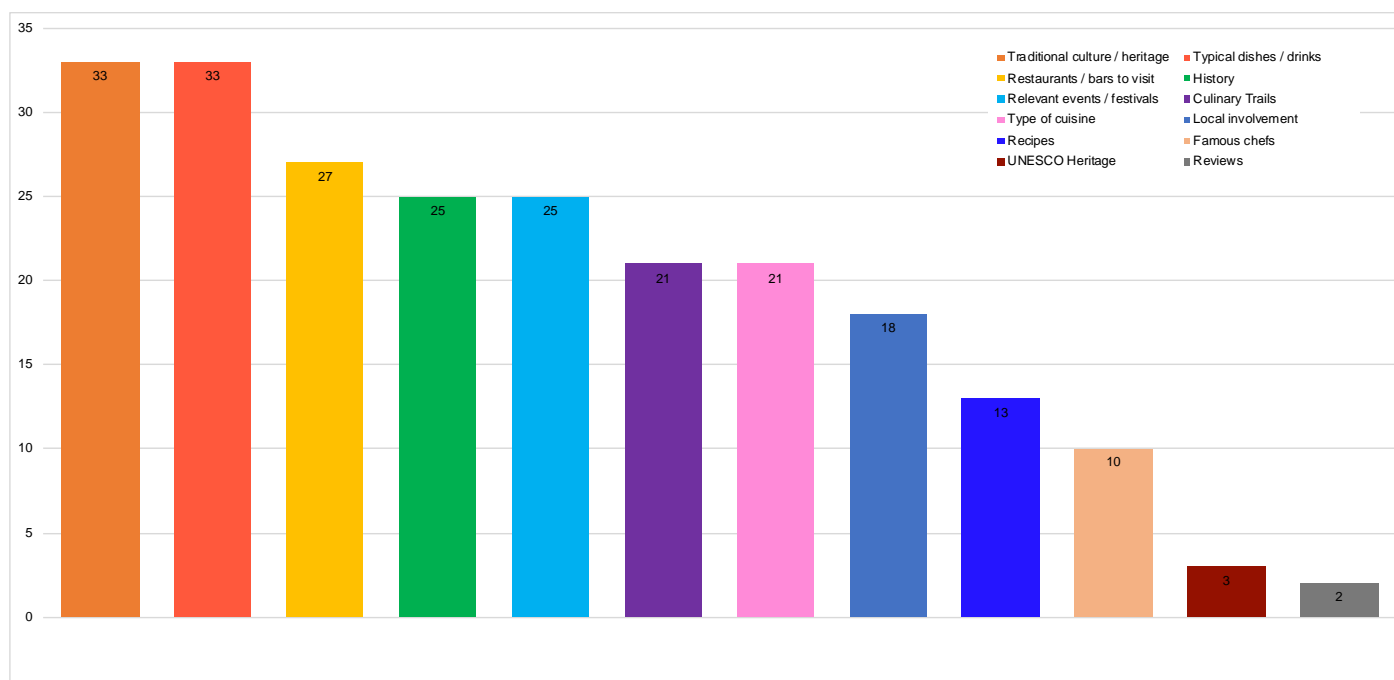
As shown in Figure 1, when talking about local food, "Traditional culture / heritage" and "Typical dishes / drinks" are the topics with most occurrences. In fact, almost all websites mention local gastronomy and products as part of their culture and mention at least one or more typical dishes and drinks that can be found and experienced at the destination.

A specific subcategory is worth mentioning in particular: "Type of cuisine", which has to be considered separately from "Typical dishes/drinks". "Type of cuisine" refers specifically to different types of cuisines, such as vegetarian or pizza places, which are not typical of the country per se, but are considered as an offering at the destination; this is highly different from what is meant as "Typical food/drinks" as it refers exclusively to local foodstuff typical and endemic of a place.

Recurring topics, such as "Restaurants/Bars to visit" (27) and "Relevant events/Festivals" (25), show the link that gastronomy has with local activities and opportunities. Indeed, tourists are invited to take part in local happenings and experience local cuisine in restaurants and bars that are relevant for the territory.

Culinary trails have become a more active and differentiated way to experience gastronomy at the destination (especially for those food tourists whose sole reason to visit a destination is to discover its cuisine, and diving into different and numerous culinary experiences). The subcategory "Culinary trail", presented as part of the experiences available at the destination, were featured in 21 websites out of the 35 studied, showing not only the interest of tourists in such activities and experiences, but also the response of destinations and availability of local businesses to cooperate and deliver a food tourism experience that includes different stops and is driven by a unique theme (beer trails, wine trails, etc.).

Besides food being a cultural element of the destination, hence embedded in the local community, only 18 websites provide information about local involvement in the production of food tourism experiences.

Recipes of local dishes are featured in 13 websites, while 10 mention "Famous chefs" (see Figure 2). Many of those are connected to the presence of Michelin starred restaurants at the destination.

Lastly, only 3 websites mention UNESCO Heritage in relation to gastronomy, and 2 provide customer reviews featured on the website for local restaurants or bars.

Figure 1. Screenshot of Denmark's (VisitDenmark) webpage on Noma and its world-famous chef
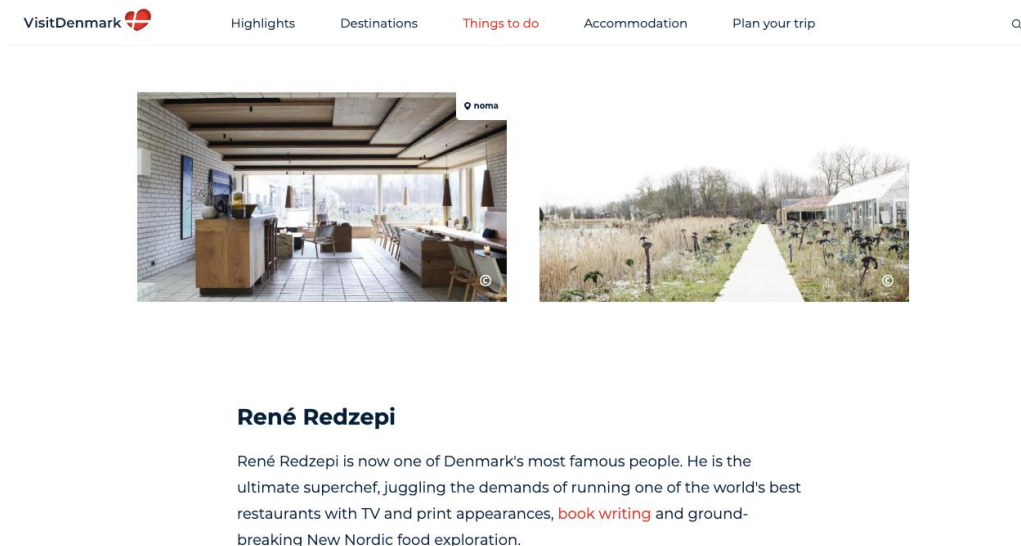
4.3. TYPE OF SECTION

Another relevant category is "Type of section", which presents where within the website the information about gastronomy is placed (see Figure 3). In fact, not all countries consider local food as a tourism attraction per se, hence they do not dedicate a full section to the topic of food tourism, which includes all the information, experiences and places connected to food tourism. However, the majority of countries tend to include food related information into general pages, such as "things to do", which list all the must-do activities at the destination, regardless of type of tourism, including sport activities, museums to visits, and restaurants alike.

Figure 2. Type of section in which gastronomy-related contents are covered (#35 websites)
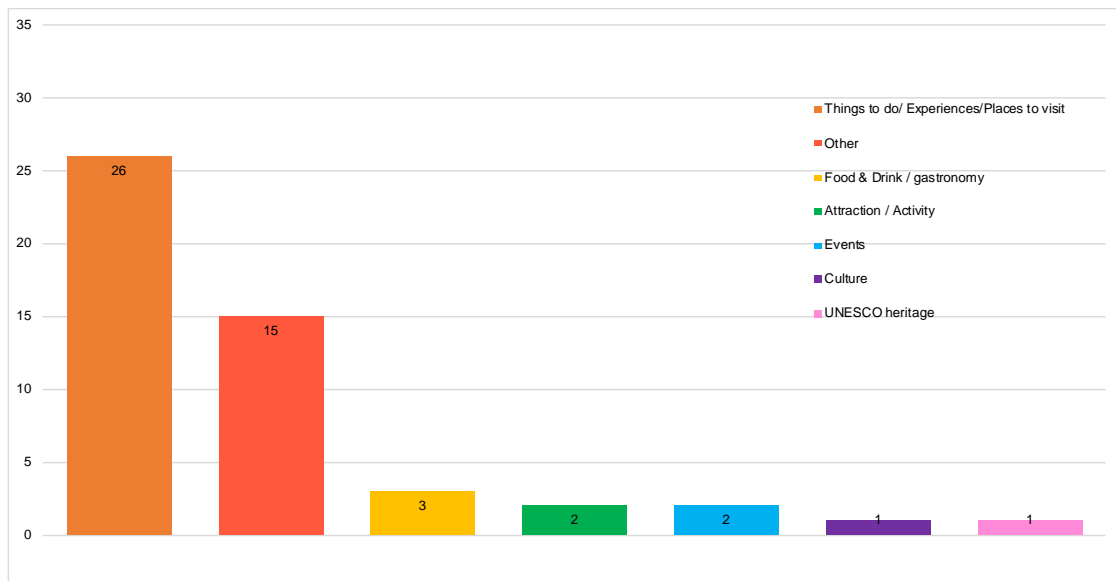
Most websites (26) place local gastronomy in a larger, more comprehensive area of the website dedicated to all things to do, experiences or places to visit connected to food and drink that are available at the destination. This is the example of Norway (see Figure 4).

Figure 3. Screenshot of Norway's (Innovation Norway) web menu
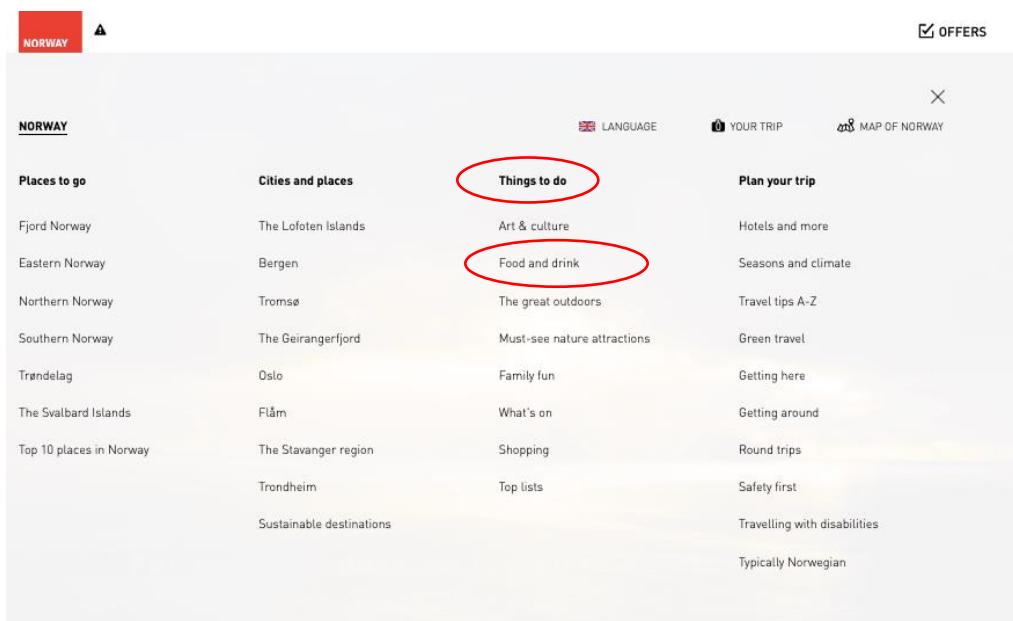
Other tourism websites provide a dedicated place on their first level web menu to "Food & drink/gastronomy" (3). Fewer websites place gastronomy information in the sections "Attraction/Activity" (2), "Events" (2), "Culture" (1) and "UNESCO heritage" (1). In the category "Type of section", the subcategory "Other" was created to include all other individual solutions in order to include and display gastronomy information; examples are the website for the region of Flanders, in Belgium, which features a "Themes"

section leading to a webpage with thematised topics including that of food at the destination; or Italy, which places local gastronomy in the "Travel Ideas" section as an "Extra" (See Figures 5 and 6).

The individual webpages with different naming that were clustered in the subcategory "Other" are considered as less conceptually relevant than, for example, the webpages that include local gastronomy as part of "Culture" or "UNESCO heritage". Meanwhile sections such as "Extra" do not trigger any specific interest in the visitors' mind, specifically the food tourists who are attracted from elements as local culture and its connection to gastronomy.

Figure 5 and 6. Screenshots of Belgium (Visit Flanders) and Italy's (ENIT - Agenzia Nazionale del Turismo) web menus and placing of food related information
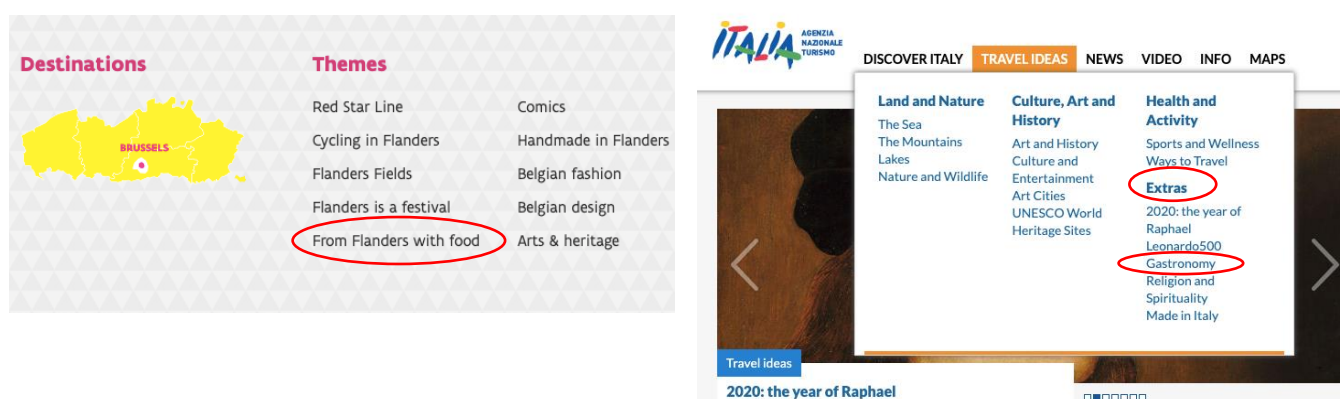
4.4 MESSAGE

The last category used to categorise and gather the information from the websites, is the category "Message", specifically this category helps in analysing the ways in which the information is delivered.
As shown in Table 1 the subcategories are: "General information or "In depth information" depending on how much the information is elaborated in detail; "Testimonial/Celebrity endorsement" referring to those messages that are communicated using the image, or voice of a well-known person (such as famous local chefs); "Pictures/Gallery" and "Video storytelling" as visual ways of communicating a message through multimedia.

The data resulting from the category "Message" shows the preference for the use of slideshows or pictures as a way to convey a message to the website users (33 websites out of 35 analysed), closely followed by a preference for general description (25) of the food related topic.

Video storytelling is also a rising favourite (21 websites) as it helps to convey emotions as well as to include footage of the gastronomy-related experience, allowing website users to get a first "taste" of the experience of food and drinks at the destination.

In 20 instances the message about food tourism is communicated with a well-rounded communication including multiple media, as well as additional information and thorough text.

Lastly, it has been noted that only 8 websites make use of celebrity endorsement on the official tourism website, to communicate their message about gastronomy at the destination.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that overall national DMOs do not fully consider food tourism as a type of tourism offer by itself, preferring to present it in conjunction with other types of tourism. This can mean, for some countries, that there is no interest in promoting the destination as a enogastronomic one; for others, that even if the food tourism offers are present on the territory, the different links necessary to make it a comprehensive national tourism offer are not present or well developed nation-wide or even locally.

Across the 35 websites analysed, it has been generally observed that local gastronomy is always present, even if it is not represented as a main tourism attraction of the destinations. While the majority of countries consider local food & drink as a cultural element (see Figure 1), hence a basic element of local culture and traditions, food tourism is still not valued as cultural tourism or presented as a valuable alternative to other types of tourism (e.g. adventure tourism, historical tourism, etc.).
However, it must be considered that food and drink elements are not as easy to communicate online as they require the use of multiple senses to be experienced fully. In fact, it is much easier to communicate scenery than the taste of a typical dish.

On the tourist side of the market, however, the need for online, accessible and comprehensive information is ever-growing. Prospect tourists and visitors need ways to visit the destination online before they do so physically, meaning they will need complete information on a certain number of topics (e.g. food tourism opportunities and, generally, food at the destination).

Destination managers, who want to redesign the tourism communication strategy of a destination to include food tourism, might consider the following recommendations:

- **Multimedia:** food and drink are difficult to convey online, however the development of ICTs with tools, such as video storytelling and mixed reality experiences, and provide a more complete online experience to tourists and can trigger an emotional stimulus in the visitors.

- **Web design:** the information about food at the destination is now mainly spread amongst different sections, which can create usability issues and consequently a loss of interest from the online visitor; the organisation of the information in topics or themes and a redesign of a website can make it more user-friendly and help in finding the needed information faster and more efficiently. Additionally, a few of the analysed websites link to external websites that are dedicated to the sole topic of food tourism (either created by the destination or by third parties within the country). More ETC members might want to consider the creation of such dedicated websites or the support (through a direct link) to already existing websites that can help in the promotion of food tourism.

- **Food experiences:** besides being a type of tourism of its own, food tourism is an essential part of tourists' visit at a destination as they will have to engage in eating or drinking at some point during their travel. Because of this, additional food experiences can be marketed to other types of tourists

(e.g. excursionists who will have to stop by to take a break; history-driven tourists that can get the chance to eat in historically relevant places or historically/regionally relevant dishes, and so on).

Further research opportunities could be to:

- Consider other language versions of the website: as per the current research, only English was considered. However, it could be interesting to analyse how the same website communicates gastronomy-related information in different languages through localisation: in fact, websites might communicate information differently depending on the different languages/intended audiences.

- Include a higher number of countries in the sample group to broaden the researched area to other continents. The websites analysed were limited in number to the ETC members (plus 3: Austria, Brussels and Northern Ireland) and did not include destinations around the globe. However, food is an element that is always present in any travel and for any type of tourist at any given destination. The inclusion of more and diverse websites could further prove how food & drink at the destination are topics of interest and are communicated virtually on every official tourism website.

- Compare the information available on local and/or regional tourism websites against information present on official national tourism websites. This analysis could give insight on the existing differences between regions within the same country regarding culinary offers and experiences available for tourists. Some countries might have highly different offers depending on regions or even small localities, making it harder to display their totality on a national tourism website, while making them more visible and well-communicated in a more focused regional tourist board website.

- Consider the tourists' perspective: the research analysed the "supply side". However, the tourists' perspective on the effectiveness of gastronomy information at the destination could also be researched, especially of those belonging to the "gastronomy lovers" community. The use of questionnaires or direct interviews to tourists can show at which level of efficacy the information is communicated and delivered, and can give DMOs insights on possible changes based on the needs of prospects and tourists.

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7. ANNEX

List of analysed websites

N°	Country	Official Tourism Website
1	Austria*[3]	https://www.austria.info/en
2	Belgium 1	https://www.visitflanders.com/en/index.jsp?country=en_US
3	Belgium 2	https://walloniabelgiumtourism.co.uk/
4	Belgium 3*	https://visit.brussels/en
5	Bulgaria	https://bulgariatravel.org/en/
6	Croatia	https://croatia.hr/en-GB
7	Cyprus	https://www.visitcyprus.com/index.php/en/
8	Czech Republic	https://www.czechtourism.com/home/
9	Denmark	https://www.visitdenmark.com/
10	Estonia	https://www.visitestonia.com/en/
11	Finland	https://www.visitfinland.com/
12	Germany	https://www.germany.travel/en/index.html
13	Greece	http://www.visitgreece.gr/
14	Hungary	https://wowhungary.com/en
15	Ireland 1	https://www.ireland.com/en-gb/
16	Ireland 2	https://www.discoverireland.ie/home
17	Ireland 3*	https://discovernorthernireland.com/
18	Italy	http://www.italia.it/en/home.html
19	Latvia	https://www.latvia.travel/
20	Lithuania	https://www.lithuania.travel/en/
21	Luxembourg	https://www.visitluxembourg.com/en
22	Malta	https://www.visitmalta.com/en/
23	Monaco	https://www.visitmonaco.com/en
24	Montenegro	https://www.montenegro.travel/en
25	Netherlands	https://www.holland.com/global/tourism.htm
26	Norway	https://www.visitnorway.com/?lang=uk
27	Poland	https://www.poland.travel/en
28	Portugal	https://www.visitportugal.com/en
29	Romania	http://www.romania.travel/en/
30	San Marino	http://archivio.visitsanmarino.com/on-line/en/home.html
31	Serbia	http://www.serbia.travel/en
32	Slovakia	https://slovakia.travel/en
33	Slovenia	https://www.slovenia.info/en
34	Spain	https://www.spain.info/en/
35	Switzerland	https://www.myswitzerland.com/en/

Websites with a * are not ETC members', however they have been included in the analysis

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[3] ETC member until January 2020

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Lorenzo Cantoni, graduated in Philosophy and holds a PhD in Education and Linguistics. He is a professor at USI, where he is director of the Institute of Digital Technologies for Communication. His research interests are where communication, education and new media overlap, ranging from computer mediated communication to usability, from eLearning to eTourism and digital Fashion, from ICT4D to eGovernment. He is director of the Master in Digital Fashion Communication, vice-director of the Master in International Tourism and chair-holder of USI' UNESCO Chair in ICT to develop and promote sustainable tourism in World Heritage Sites.