

Chapter 25

It's All About Cheese!

Gastronomic Routes Around Certified Cheese Products in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

Gastronomic routes have gained significant recognition as effective tools for promoting and showcasing local endogenous products. As a result, they contribute to the economic development of local communities, enhance cultural heritage preservation, and foster a sense of pride and identity among residents. The main objective of this study is to investigate and analyze existing gastronomic routes, around endogenous certified cheese products, in Portugal. Understanding the existing gastronomic cheese routes will not only contribute to the academic literature, but also offer practical implications for local stakeholders, including tourism authorities, destination management organizations. By identifying successful practices and potential areas for improvement, this study can guide the development and enhancement of gastronomic routes, leading to more sustainable and rewarding experiences for visitors and greater economic benefits. This work was based on a qualitative research approach (interviews with tourism promotion agents responsible for creating and implementing these tourist routes).

INTRODUCTION

Gastronomic routes have gained significant recognition as effective tools for promoting food tourism and showcasing local endogenous products. These routes offer visitors an immersive experience, allowing them to explore and indulge in the distinctive flavors, ingredients, and culinary traditions of a specific

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region. As a result, they contribute to the economic development of local communities, enhance cultural heritage preservation, and foster a sense of pride and identity among residents.

This study is motivated by the growing importance of gastronomic routes and the need for in-depth research on their development and impact. The studies by Niedbała et al. (2020), La Torre et al. (2022) and Sánchez-Cubo et al. (2023) served as inspiration. In the first work, the authors present the idea of 'The Best Pork of Wielkopolska' culinary trail in Poland, which focuses on a local product—the Złotnicka White pig, a native breed (Niedbała et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the studies by La Torre et al. (2022) and Sánchez-Cubo et al. (2023) explores ham tourism in Spain. The renowned traditional food product, Iberian ham, is endorsed by Protected Denominations of Origin and offers various tourist attractions, including gastronomic tours.

Cheese tourism has emerged as a significant segment within food tourism, attracting visitors eager to explore the rich traditions of cheese-making and tasting in different regions. Cheese is an important cultural and economic product in many parts of the world, including Portugal. The country is renowned for its diverse and high-quality cheeses, which are protected by geographical indications such as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and are central to the culinary heritage of their respective regions. The importance of cheese in Portugal's gastronomy cannot be overstated, as it not only enhances the country's culinary appeal but also supports local economies and preserves traditional cheese-making practices.

With this study we aim to shed light on the current state of gastronomic route initiatives centered around certified cheese products, in Portugal. To do so, a qualitative research approach was used, including document analysis and content analysis techniques and interviews to the route developers/managers.

By identifying successful practices and potential areas for improvement, this study can guide the development and enhancement of gastronomic routes, leading to more sustainable and rewarding experiences for visitors and greater economic benefits for the regions. Also, understanding these routes will contribute to the academic literature on food tourism and regional development and offer practical implications for local stakeholders, including tourism authorities, destination management organizations, and local producers.

The chapter is divided into several sections that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The background section provides a foundation for our study by exploring the concepts related to food tourism, gastronomic routes and cheese tourism. Subsequently, in the methodology section, we outline the research approach and methods used to gather data and analyze the gastronomic routes. The results section presents findings from the cheese routes that were found in Portugal and the results of the interviews conducted. Finally, in the conclusion section, we delve into the implications and significance of our results, engaging in critical analysis and providing insights into potential future directions for research. Also, we summarize the key findings and contributions of our study, highlighting the practical implications of our research and offering recommendations for policymakers, tourism professionals, and stakeholders to leverage gastronomy as a strategic asset for regional development.

BACKGROUND

Gastronomy as a Tourist Resource

Gastronomy is a key factor for many tourism destinations. It plays a fundamental role when it comes to attracting people from other places (La Torre, et al., 2022) and it is a central element in cultural heritage offer (Berbel-Pineda, et al., 2019).

According to Chen and Huang (2016) the relationship between tourism and gastronomy can be explored through four distinct study categories: 1) the role of food as an integral part of local culture consumed by tourists; 2) the significance of food as a tourist attraction in its own right; 3) the recognition of food as a marketable tourist product; and 4) the emphasis on food as a transformative and memorable tourist experience, which significantly contributes to overall tourist satisfaction (Chen & Huang, 2016). Our study specifically focuses on the fourth category - food as a tourist experience - as it aims to investigate the presence of gastronomic routes inspired by traditional certified food products, cheese in particular.

Food tourism may be defined as “visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants, and specific locations for which food tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of a specialist food production region are the primary motivating factor for travel” (Hall & Mitchell, 2001, p. 308). Therefore, when discussing food tourism, a distinction needs to be made between tourists who consume food as part of the travel experience and those whose activities, behaviors, and even destination selection are influenced by an interest in food (Hall & Sharples, 2004). This type of tourism is regarded as a significant protector of cultural heritage and plays a crucial role in creating opportunities and employment (Niedbała et al., 2020), particularly in rural destinations. It differentiates destinations and offers unique and authentic products, as it revolves around the pursuit of a distinctive experience in eating and drinking, the culinary creativity, and the genuine connection to a place (World Tourism Organization, 2017). Local food, being a fundamental tourist attraction, contributes significantly to overall tourist satisfaction (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016).

This type of tourism encompasses a wide array of culinary experiences, including seminars, visits to wineries and agricultural producers, gastronomy-related attractions, events, and guided tours (World Food Travel Association, 2024). These immersive experiences have a profound influence on visitor behavior, creating lasting and memorable moments while also shaping post-travel preferences and choices (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Henderson, 2009). Gastronomic experiences are highly valued by tourists (Liutikas, 2023), who often photograph food, share their experiences on social media, purchase local gastronomy-related products, and participate in various gastronomy-related activities tours (World Food Travel Association, 2024). Gastronomy is considered a distinctive and strategic element in defining a destination's image and brand.

Food Experiences: Gastronomic Routes

The rising trend of food tourism has propelled an increasing number of people to travel for gastronomic motives (Niedbała et al., 2020). Food plays a pivotal role in influencing travel decisions and serves as a fundamental motivator for tourists (Knollenberg et al., 2020). Travelers are actively seeking unique local products with a strong connection to the territory and local communities. In response to this demand, food tourism experiences have gained popularity, with food tours, cooking classes, wine

tastings, brewery tours, producer visits, and market experiences ranking among the most sought-after (World Food Travel Association, 2024).

In recent years, the development of themed routes has emerged as a significant phenomenon in the tourism industry. These routes offer numerous advantages, including attracting tourists to specific territories, linking attractions that may not independently draw visitors, and facilitating the expenditure of time and money within the designated areas (Espinosa et al., 2022; Meyer, 2004). Themed routes provide a platform for creating networks, fostering synergies, and promoting economic growth. Within this framework, gastronomic routes have gained prominence as an integral part of gastronomic tourism (Roy et al., 2019).

Gastronomic routes are thematic territorial networks built around specific certified products, transcending mere tourist appeal to encompass broader objectives such as local development and product valorization (Barrera, 2006). They offer not only culinary experiences but also insights into historical landmarks, thereby fostering economic growth within regions (La Torre et al., 2010). Gastronomic routes serve as catalysts for economic growth and cultural preservation, capitalizing on intangible and tangible elements such as heritage, culture, gastronomy, and history (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017; Mota & Gonçalves, 2022). These routes play a crucial role in promoting the authenticity and cultural identity of a region, reinforcing the quality and reputation of its certified products (De Suremain, 2017; Sánchez-Cubo et al., 2023).

Delgadillo and Valiente (2019) propose essential steps in creating gastronomic routes. These steps include geographically delimiting the route, conducting comprehensive studies of available tourism offerings to identify products and services relevant to the route, and curating a directory of establishments where visitors can savour the gastronomic delights alongside the associated recipes and cooking techniques. Gastronomic routes can be found at various scales, ranging from municipal to international levels, with the product itself often lending its name to the route. Notable examples include the Brengenerwald Cheese Route in Austria, the Cordoba Cheese and Roasted Suckling Goat Route, the Rio Negro Pear and Apple Route, the Coffee Route in Colombia, the Olive Oil Route in Croatia, the Benelux Asparagus, Mussel, and Hop Route, the Spanish Ham and Olive Oil Route, the Malaysian Tiger Prawn Route, and the Swiss Chocolate and Gruyère Cheese Route (Delgadillo & Valiente, 2019).

Gastronomic routes cantered around certified products have emerged as a thriving aspect of gastronomic tourism, offering a platform for promoting local certified products, stimulating economic development, preserving cultural heritage, and providing tourists with exceptional culinary experiences.

Cheese Tourism

Cheese tourism has emerged as a dynamic sector within food tourism, attracting visitors eager to taste and learn about cheese in its local cultural context. Also, in recent years, several academics have become interested in doing research on this topic (Fusté-Forné, 2020a).

This niche tourism has grown significantly as tourists seek authentic and immersive culinary experiences. It involves not just tasting cheese, but also understanding the cheese-making process and the cultural significance behind it (Fusté-Forné, 2020a). Tourists can visit cheese producers, participate in cheese-making workshops, attend cheese festivals, and explore regions known for their cheese production (Hall & Sharples, 2004). These activities offer a unique lens through which to explore a region's heritage and traditions.

The appeal of cheese tourism lies in its ability to offer a unique and memorable travel experience. Tourists engage directly with local producers, learning about traditional cheese-making methods and the specific conditions that contribute to the unique flavors of different cheeses (Fusté-Forné, 2016). This immersive experience enhances the overall travel experience and significantly contributes to tourist satisfaction (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). Furthermore, cheese tourism supports local economies by promoting regional products and attracting visitors throughout the year, mitigating the effects of seasonality in tourism (Fusté-Forné, 2016; Kivela & Crotts, 2006).

Cheese routes are thematic trails designed to connect tourists with regions known for their cheese production. These routes provide an organized way for tourists to explore different cheese-producing areas, offering a comprehensive and engaging experience that combines gastronomy, culture, and education. Often include visits to dairies, cheese-making demonstrations, tastings, and cultural activities related to the region's cheese-making traditions (Roy et al., 2019).

Cheese routes offer numerous advantages, specially to local communities, since they drive economic growth by attracting tourists and promoting local products. They create opportunities for local producers to showcase their products to a broader audience, often leading to increased sales and market expansion (Fusté-Forné & Cerdan, 2021). Additionally, cheese routes help in preserving traditional cheese-making techniques and promoting the cultural heritage of the region (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017).

Cheese routes also contribute to sustainable tourism development, by drawing tourists to less-visited rural areas, they help distribute the economic benefits of tourism more evenly and reduce the pressure on more popular tourist destinations. This can lead to more balanced regional development and support for rural communities (Meyer, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach and employs a combination of documentary analysis, content analysis techniques and interviews. It employs a model that has been previously utilized and validated by the authors in other studies focused on the same subject matter but conducted in distinct geographic areas (Barroco et al., 2022; Duque et al., 2023).

To begin with, a corpus was established by conducting a comprehensive survey of all food products certified with Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), and Traditional Specialty Guaranteed (TSG) labels. The list of certified products was obtained from the Portuguese Traditional Products Portal (Direção-Geral de Agricultura e Desenvolvimento Rural, 2024). From this list, a selection was made within the “Agricultural Products and Foodstuffs”, more specifically the “Cheese and Dairy Products” category. Subsequently, each researcher performed individual searches using the Google search engine, entering the names of the certified cheese products along with terms related to tourist routes and itineraries (e.g., tourist route + Beira Baixa Cheese; tourist itinerary + Beira Baixa Cheese). This research was performed in Portuguese.

After the data collection phase, content analysis was employed to identify, select, and synthesize the gathered information. For this purpose, a grid (in Excel) was created to record the following elements: route name; associated certified product(s); brief description; types of activities included in the experience; and responsible organization/management of the route. It is important to note that the content analysis was initially conducted independently by each researcher, and subsequently, the results were compared, and a final grid was created to consolidate the findings.

The qualitative interview-based design, consistent with previous studies about the topic (Fusté-Forné, 2020a; Fusté-Forné, 2020b; Magri-Harsich et al., 2024), enables participants to share their views on the topic and helps researchers grasp the research objective and the connections between cheese and tourism.

The interview script was prepared considering the objectives set for the research and a series of studies about cheese tourism and gastronomic routes, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview script

No.	Questions	Adapted from:
Idea, creation and development of the route		
1	What motivated the creation of this route? Give a brief description.	Espinosa et al (2022)
Implementation of the route and involvement with stakeholders		
2	The agents that make up the route's tourist offer include representatives from accommodation, restaurants, farmers/producers, local businesses (cheese factories) and cultural spaces (museums). Tell us about the involvement of these agents in the project? Was it easy to organize and motivate them to create the route? What went well and what went less well? How were they organized? Were there any prior meetings before the route was created?	Sánchez-Cubo et al. (2023)
3	What are the main challenges and opportunities associated with this project?	Fusté-Forné (2020b) Sánchez-Cubo et al. (2023)
Tourism demand in the territories		
4	What is the profile of visitors to this route (excursionists, national tourists, international tourists)? Do they travel in groups? Alone? How do you manage this control?	Sánchez-Cubo et al. (2023)
5	Is the seasonality of tourism very evident in the area? How can this cheese route help to mitigate the effects of seasonal tourism?	Fusté-Forné (2020b)
6	In terms of promotion/marketing strategy, what have you been doing?	Magri-Harsich et al. (2024)
Project sustainability (economic, social and environmental)		
7	How does this route contribute to promoting the sustainability of the territory and the local community?	De Suremain (2017)
8	Can you quantify the economic impact this route is having on local stakeholders? Do you know if sales have increased?	Magri-Harsich et al. (2024) Espinosa et al (2022)
9	In terms of social sustainability, the route is based on local players. How is community involvement carried out? Is the local community aware of the route and has it helped to promote it? Has there been training for local tourist agents?	Espinosa et al (2022) De Suremain (2017)
Cheese Tourism		
10	Cheese tourism is a growing tourist product. Portugal is also a rapidly developing tourist destination, with gastronomy being one of the main aspects mentioned by tourists. What are your prospects for the future?	Fusté-Forné (2020b) Liutikas (2023)

continued on following page

Table 1. Continued

No.	Questions	Adapted from:
11	Taking into account the diversity of experiences that are part of gastronomic tourism (festivals and events; routes and trails; visits to local farms and producers; restaurants; museums; training and tastings; markets; ...) do you think that this route provides a diverse and attractive offer? What could be improved?	Liutikas (2023)
12	Thinking a little about the future of the route... Could it be replicated in other regions? Could the number of agents involved be increased? Or the number of certified cheeses? And what about the biggest cheese event in the world, the World Cheese Awards, which will be held in Portugal for the first time in November 2024. What added value can such an event bring to the region?	Own elaboration

Source: Authors

RESULTS

Portugal is the fourth country in the European Union with the highest number of certified food products, following Italy (1st), France (2nd), and Spain (3rd) (Pato & Duque, 2023). Currently, there are 149 registered products in Portugal¹, 68 has the label of Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and 81 are labelled as Protected Geographical Indication (PGI).

As described above, one of the first steps in this research was to identify the existing certified cheeses in Portugal. There are currently 16 certified cheeses in Portugal: Beira Baixa PDO cheese; Azeitão PDO cheese; PDO Transmontano Goat Cheese; Évora PDO cheese; Nisa PDO cheese; Pico PDO cheese; Tolosa Mestiço PGI cheese; Rabaçal PDO cheese; São Jorge PDO cheese; Serpa PDO cheese; Serra da Estrela PDO cheese; Terrincho cheese PDO; Beira Baixa PDO cottage cheese; Madeira cottage cheese PGI; Serra da Estrela cottage cheese PDO; Travia da Beira Baixa PDO.

Next, a search was made for existing tourist and/or gastronomic routes in Portugal, whose name had a direct link to one or more of these certified cheeses. The research revealed the existence of 4 routes (see Table 2).

Table 2. Existing certified cheese routes in Portugal

No.	Route Name	Cheese Certified Products	Website
1	Tourist and Gastronomic Route of the Cheeses of the Centre of Portugal	Beira Baixa PDO cheese; Rabaçal PDO cheese; Serra da Estrela PDO cheese	www.rotaqueijoscentrodeportugal.com/en/the-route/
2	Serra da Estrela Cheese Route	Serra da Estrela PDO cheese	www.cm-oliveiradohospital.pt/turismo/roteiro-queijo-serra-da-estrela/
3	Beira Interior Cheese Route	Serra da Estrela PDO cheese	www.visiteserradaestrela.pt/pt/itineraries/sensations-flavours/rota-do-queijo-da-beira-interior
4	São Jorge Cheese Route	São Jorge PDO cheese	www.rotadoqueijosaojorge.com/en/rota-do-queijo-english/

Source: Authors (July 2024 results)

Serra da Estrela PDO cheese is a major protagonist on the Portuguese scene, with most of the existing routes dedicated to promoting it. This is a cheese that has won several international distinctions, which may justify this investment. In the most recent competition promoted by Taste Atlas 23/24, the “100 Best Cheeses in the World”, Serra da Estrela PDO cheese came fifth in the world ranking (Taste Atlas, 2024).

The Serra da Estrela Cheese Route (no.2) is an initiative developed by a municipality in the Central Region of Portugal (Oliveira do Hospital) and structurally cannot be considered a route. It only consists of identifying the various cheese producers and points of sale in the region, so that visitors can visit and buy the product directly.

As for the Beira Interior Cheese Route (no.3), this is an initiative of the Beiras and Serra da Estrela Intermunicipal Community, which consists of a group of 15 municipalities that are organized to promote economic development in the area. Various tourism projects have been created within this framework and one of them involves suggesting sites and businesses in the territory that have a connection to the star product that is Serra da Estrela PDO cheese. Once again, like route no.2, this one doesn't have a formal route structure, it's just agents identified in a territory.

Therefore, the following analysis focuses on the study of two routes - Tourist and Gastronomic Route of the Cheeses of the Centre of Portugal (no.1) and São Jorge Cheese Route (no.4), which are effectively tourist routes, with a well-developed structure, tested and duly implemented in the territory.

The Tourist and Gastronomic Route of the Cheeses of the Centre of Portugal is renowned for its diverse cheese offerings, including three varieties of certified cheeses: Serra da Estrela PDO, Rabaçal PDO, and Beira Baixa PDO. The route not only highlights the rich cheese-making traditions of the region but also integrates cultural and historical experiences, allowing visitors to explore the broader heritage of central Portugal. This route offers tourists the chance to get in touch with nature and the countryside. To achieve this, the Tourist and Gastronomic Route offers 50 experiences linked to the certified cheese sector, led by 47 local agents based in the three PDO regions of Central Portugal (Rota Queijos Centro de Portugal, 2024).

The São Jorge Cheese Route in the Azores focuses on the production of São Jorge cheese, a PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) product made exclusively on São Jorge Island. This route offers an immersive experience that covers the entire process of making São Jorge cheese - from the collection of milk to its selection and, finally, the transformation to produce a differentiated dairy product with a long tradition. Tourists can visit cheese factories, meet local producers, and participate in tastings that showcase the distinct, spicy flavor of this typical cheese. The route emphasizes the island's natural beauty and cultural heritage, providing a holistic travel experience, culminating in the development of various experiences (2 full-day, 4 half-day) that can be carried out independently or guided by local companies, who enrich the whole experience with their knowledge and interpretation of the territory (Rota Queijo São Jorge, 2024).

The entities that manage the two routes were contacted and were readily willing to collaborate with our research. The interviews were carried out in June and July 2024. The Project Manager was interviewed on behalf of the Central Portugal Cheese Route. And representing the São Jorge Cheese Route was one of the people responsible for coordinating the tourist route project on the Azorean islands, a representative of the Azores Regional Tourism Board.

The interviews followed the script presented in Table 1 and five main themes can be identified: 1) Idea, creation and development of the route; 2) Implementation of the route and involvement with stakeholders; 3) Tourism demand in the territories; 4) Project sustainability (economic, social and environmental); 5) Cheese tourism.

Idea, Creation and Development of the Route

As for the origin and creation of the two routes, they are quite different. Route of the Cheeses of the Centre of Portugal was implemented in 2023 and follows a project funded by the European Union, which aimed to enhance the agricultural sector and boost small businesses related to milk and cheese production. The initial project emerged in 2018/2019 with the need to enhance the certified cheeses in the territory. It was only later, in a second phase of the project, that the tourist aspect was added, and the tourist and gastronomic route was created.

The São Jorge Cheese Route is part of a series of themed tourist and cultural itineraries promoted by Azores Tourism Board, and which has been under development for some time. These tourist itineraries cover the themes of vineyards, volcanoes, whales and cheese. In recent years, the offer has been structured and training has been given to local agents, preparing them to welcome visitors and provide them with unforgettable experiences.

Implementation of the Route and Involvement With Stakeholders

The two routes under analysis confront us with different realities, both in terms of their geographical size and the number of stakeholders involved. On the one hand, the Central Portugal Cheese Route includes 47 local agents, ranging from cheese factories, restaurants, tourist accommodation and museums. On the other hand, the Azores Route has around 10 local agents, mostly farmers and cheese producers.

Both interviewees pointed out that it was relatively easy to approach local stakeholders and make them understand what they stand to gain from joining these tourist routes. Basically, they have nothing to lose. The most difficult part is related to formalizing their participation in the route, namely interpreting, filling in and sending in the necessary forms and documentation.

Regarding the main challenges and opportunities faced, both initiatives reflect a shared commitment to leveraging traditional cheese production for sustainable tourism development, yet they also highlight unique regional challenges and strategic approaches. In the case of cheeses of the Centre of Portugal, the main difficulty lies in the fact that the project is dependent on external (European) funds, which affects the pace of development and promotion of the route. In the case of São Jorge cheese, the main difficulty is the fact that the route is managed by a government entity, which limits some actions, namely promotion and marketing (for example, there are no social networks exclusive to tourist routes, there is only one page that is common to the Regional Tourism Board).

Tourism Demand in the Territories

Regarding the visitor profile, none of the organizations managing the routes has been able to control the exact numbers so far. At Centre of Portugal Route, they can count the number of people who download and install the route's app, but they can't confirm which experiences they book and which agents they visit.

On the island of São Jorge, given its small size and the fact that cheese is one of the territory's main tourist attractions, it could be counted by the number of visitors who go to the island's tourist office in combination with those who visit the cheese factories. But this is not yet being done in a coordinated way.

The seasonality of tourist activity is a problem that cuts across many territories. In this sense, the two routes are a possible solution to mitigate seasonality in the territory, offering different experiences to visitors at different times of the year.

Both routes emphasize the importance of marketing, though their approaches differ. The Route of the Cheeses of the Centre of Portugal proactively uses digital marketing to enhance visibility and attract a broader audience throughout the year. In contrast, the São Jorge Cheese Route relies heavily on traditional marketing methods due to governmental restrictions on digital promotions, as already mentioned. The interviewee expressed a future intention to shift towards digital campaigns to overcome these limitations.

Project Sustainability

Sustainability is a core principle for both routes, manifesting in economic, social, and environmental impacts. The Tourist and Gastronomic Route of the Cheeses of the Centre of Portugal supports small producers and family-run businesses, fostering a sense of local pride and ensuring sustainable growth. The São Jorge Cheese Route also supports small producers, with an added emphasis on traditional, sustainable cheese production methods. Both routes aim to distribute tourist flow to smaller communities, reducing pressure on more popular tourist spots and enhancing the social and economic well-being of local communities.

Community involvement is pivotal to the success of these projects. The Tourist and Gastronomic Route of the Cheeses of the Centre of Portugal aims to foster stronger ties with the community through workshops and collaborative initiatives, enhancing local support and ensuring the equitable distribution of tourism benefits. The São Jorge Cheese Route involves training programs for tourism agents and emphasizes the importance of local knowledge and pride in the cheese's cultural significance. Both routes recognize the need for greater community engagement to enhance the authenticity of the tourist experience and strengthen the community's connection to its cultural heritage.

Cheese Tourism

Looking ahead, both routes have ambitious plans for expansion and greater international exposure. The Tourist and Gastronomic Route of the Cheeses of the Centre of Portugal aims to scale up and perhaps replicate its success in other regions and capitalizing on international events to elevate the visibility and appeal of Portuguese cheeses on the global culinary stage.

The São Jorge Cheese Route aims to expand its reach by including other Azorean islands and agricultural products. This expansion is seen as a natural progression to showcase the diverse cheese-making traditions of the region and to boost inter-island tourism.

Both routes are committed to ensuring sustainable growth while maintaining traditional practices and leveraging new opportunities for promotion and expansion. Participation in international events such as the World Cheese Awards, which in 2024 will take place in the city of Viseu (Portugal), is also on the agenda, providing a platform to gain global recognition and attract a wider audience.

CONCLUSION

The development of this research was deemed relevant by the authors due to the growing importance of gastronomic or food tourism and the associated experiences worldwide, as highlighted by previous studies (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017; Mota & Gonçalves, 2022). In this context, Portugal have wit-

nessed the increasing significance of food tourism, evident from dedicated sections on official tourism websites (e.g., Visit Portugal) emphasizing the importance of this segment.

Within the theoretical framework, it is acknowledged that gastronomic routes hold a crucial role in promoting a region's authenticity, cultural identity, and certified products' quality and reputation (Delgadillo & Valiente, 2019). These routes serve as vehicles to showcase the heritage, culture, gastronomy, and history, aligning with the aim of this research. Regarding the types of activities that can be carried out within the routes, they are very diverse, allowing for the attraction of various audiences. Within the spectrum of experiences, they can take on a lighter form, such as landscape observation or an accommodation experience, or on the other hand, participants may be invited to actively participate. The activities identified in these tourist routes include landscape observation, engaging in light to moderate physical activities (e.g., trails and hikes), visiting museums and/or thematic exhibitions, product tastings, visits to producers and distributors of certified products, and hands-on experiences (e.g., milking cows or making cheese).

By conducting this study, the authors aim to provide relevant insights to the managers of tourist territories, including municipalities, intermunicipal communities, and regional tourism entities. Understanding the current gastronomic tourism offer and its diverse manifestations will allow these stakeholders to better meet visitors' expectations and, if necessary, refine and create new experiences. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discussion on enhancing the development and promotion of gastronomic routes, leveraging heritage, culture, and local gastronomy to create memorable and authentic tourism experiences.

One of the major challenges faced by the researchers in this study revolves around the interpretation and application of the concept of a gastronomic route. Frequently, experiences are marketed and categorized as routes, but a closer examination reveals significant variations in their nature and composition. Traditionally, a gastronomic route is defined as a thematic territorial network centered around specific certified products (Barrera, 2006), offering more than just culinary experiences (La Torre et al., 2010). These routes aim to promote local development, enhance product valorization, and contribute to broader objectives such as cultural preservation and economic growth within regions (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017; Mota & Gonçalves, 2022; Delgadillo & Valiente, 2019). However, during this study, the researchers encountered diverse manifestations of routes that deviated from the traditional definition. These include routes consisting of a series of carefully selected locations where visitors could savor a specific product, highlighting its local origins and distinct flavors (e.g. the Serra da Estrela Cheese Route (no.2, in Table 2). Furthermore, sports trails were identified yet another form of route, providing opportunities for athletic pursuits and outdoor exploration. A Portuguese municipality (Celorico da Beira) is promoting the Curd Cheese Route, which consists of a walk as part of a sporting event. Finally, a potentially misleading situation was detected, the existence of a cheese store called Rota do Queijo (Cheese Route).

The presence of such varied interpretations and applications of the route concept poses a significant challenge to this research. It underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding and classification of routes in the context of gastronomic tourism. By addressing this challenge, the study aims to contribute to the development of clear guidelines and frameworks for the creation and promotion of authentic and meaningful gastronomic routes. These efforts will ultimately enhance the tourism experience, stimulate economic growth, and preserve the cultural heritage of the regions under investigation.

Ultimately, the study's main contributions lie in its ability to inform and inspire local tourist agents, providing them with evidence-based insights and practical examples of successful approaches within the realm of cheese tourism. By disseminating these findings, the study seeks to foster collaboration,

innovation, and the continuous improvement of cheese tourism offerings, enhancing the overall visitor experience and contributing to the sustainable development of the studied regions.

We believe that the commitment to food tourism, in general, and cheese tourism, in particular, should be made by several territories. This is because food tourism offers several advantages. Firstly, it serves as a driving force for the local economy by promoting economic growth through the promotion of local products and gastronomy (Alderighi et al., 2016). Gastronomic tourism can help in tackling seasonality (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). Although the production of certain foods is highly seasonal (e.g. some vegetables and fruit) and certain products are only available for a few months a year (e.g. certain animal species, due to their growth/reproductive cycle), gastronomic tourism can be an excellent way of attracting visitors at certain times of the year, mitigating the effects of seasonality on peak tourist demand. In the case of cheese tourism, there are cheeses that can be produced all year round, as São Jorge cheese, mentioned in the article. This characteristic ensures a more consistent flow of visitors and revenue, contributing to the sustainability of the tourism industry in the destination. Furthermore, food tourism provides opportunities for cultural exchange and appreciation, as tourists engage with local traditions, culinary practices, and the people behind the food (Kivela et al., 2011). This cultural immersion enhances the overall travel experience and contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage. By embracing the unique flavors and culinary traditions of a destination, gastronomic tourism offers a memorable and authentic journey for tourists while supporting the local economy and preserving cultural identities.

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