

Historic Sites with Tasty Bites: Exploring Uzbekistan's Potential for agro-culinary tourism

Key Messages

- The agro tourism subsector is underdeveloped but has potential to create livelihoods in rural areas
- Agro tourism often takes place at the household level—Its potential contribution to the tourism sector and household wellbeing is unexplored
- Developing the “Delicious Uzbekistan” brand, may support the country as a destination for food tourism
- Viniculture could extend tourism to more destinations and strengthen the brand

A traditionally agricultural country, Uzbekistan encompasses many culinary traditions from its local ethnic diversity. Its reputation for high-quality fruits and vegetables has reached niche markets in Europe and is part of its attraction as a tourist destination. Quality meals are prepared with skill. Even so, the country is only starting to leverage this potential.

Gastronomic Tourism

(also culinary or food tourism) refers to all travels motivated by authentic and memorable culinary experiences with specific food and beverages.¹ This tourism is considered a niche, but research shows such motivation increasingly effects tourists' choices of destination worldwide². Gastro-tourism is considered a subset of cultural or heritage tourism. At the core of food tourism is the direct experience of people's identity, ethnicity, traditions, and aesthetic tastes. In short, peoples' food, is the result of century-long

practices it gives us access to a culture different from our own.

Gastro-tourism combines behind-the-scenes observations with insights into the material culture of the host country. For instance, the king of the Uzbek table, *plov*³ (rice pilaf), can be further developed as a touristic product. It is different in every region of the country, not only in taste but in colors—green in Bukhara, black in Fergana, light elsewhere but always with different ingredients and flavors. A “*plov* route” could be formed and combined with tours of the main Uzbek historical monuments.

In a multinational country like Uzbekistan, food and nutrition culture reflect the interaction of different Asian peoples. In the country, visitors can discover Uighur, Tatar, various Korean kitchens and original contribution from Slavic, German and Caucasian peoples. Apart from restaurants, plates from these traditions are available in many bazars. At the same time, Tashkent, as it represents the maximum ethnic diversity in the country, could create a regional street food district in the center of the city, similar to Istanbul or Lisbon,⁴ where tourists could visit to taste diverse flavors and appreciate the multi-ethnic heritage of the country. Since independence, the presence of several ethnic groups has occasionally been perceived as a potential threat for national consolidation. At the opposite, gastro-tourism could stress how the mosaic of languages and traditions is first of all an asset for the future of the country.

Beside these opportunities, the strategic importance of culinary tourism for Uzbekistan lays in its potential to support livelihoods and growth in the tourism sector in rural areas.

¹ Williams, H.A., Williams Jr., R.L. and Omar, M. (2014) ‘Gastro-tourism as destination branding in emerging markets’, *Int. J. Leisure and Tourism Marketing*, 4, 1, pp.1–18.

² A UNWTO survey found 88.2% of respondents indicating that “gastronomy is a strategic element in defining the brand and image of their destination”.

³ During his conquests of Central Asia, even Alexander the great was impressed by the types and quality of plov. Nabhan, Gary Paul (2014). *Cumin, Camels, and Caravans: A Spice Odyssey*. University of California Press.

⁴ Recently the Portuguese city was proposed as a model by local operators. See: “Uzbekskiy Dokash: v Tashkente namereny sozdat' nochnuyu gastro-nicheskiy ulitsu”, *Sputnik*, 03.03.2020; <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/tourism/20200303/13590276/Uzbekskiy-Dokash-v-Tashkente-namereny-sozdat-nochnuyu-gastronicheskuyu-ulitsu.html>

Gastronomic tourism links to agritourism, which suggests travel to the countryside for stays in farms, guesthouses, small hotels, and other rural accommodations. A wide range of food-related tourist activities: gastronomic festivals, producers' fairs, farmers' markets, cooking shows, demonstrations and lessons, food tastings, can be organized more efficiently away from the cities.⁵

Sustainable Tourism

By providing services for visitors, small and medium-sized enterprises can develop with start-up investments which usually pay off in a short time. This has high potential for job and income generation with direct effect on poverty reduction. Besides, economic linkages strengthened by tourism, its development leads to improved infrastructure and increased environmental protection also improving the quality of life in the countryside. Given the low impact on the environment and employment generation in villages, agro tourism relates gastro-tourism to sustainable tourism.

Viniculture

Uzbekistan all necessary features to set up agro-gastronomic clusters oriented to specific tourism-related activities to improve rural life. The Uzbek countryside presents a vast array of fruits and vegetables, products usually out of the country's branding as a destination. This is true for viniculture and wine-making. Wine is often considered the culture above all others. Despite appearances, wine is linked to Uzbek lands since ancient times. Although most of the present national wine-making stems from the second half of the XIX century, the practice flourished at the dawn of civilization, when Central Asia was part of the Persian cultural world. The expansion of Islam to the region restricted this tradition without interrupting it completely. (Abdulloyev D. 1998). In the XIII century Venetian traveler Marco Polo wrote that:

“Samarkand, Bukhara are decorated with orchards and vineyards. Local population offered me wine. It was more than a dozen years old, and striking for its excellent quality. I have never tasted anything like it before.”

The high solar exposure and particular climate of the country allow for producing different types of wines from the same grapes depending on the timing of the harvest. Besides, there is a pure Central Asian wine, the Musalyas, made from grape juice fermented in clay jugs.

Uzbekistan's President, Shavkat Mirziyoev, singled out the great prospect of national winegrowing. He proposed importing cuttings from Europe (to improve and reinvigorate Uzbekistan's wine industry) and organizing an annual international wine festival and food events. (Baumgartner, Babajanov 2018).

As Sergey Danilov, the brand-developer of “Delicious Uzbekistan”, suggests, as a wine-producing country, Uzbekistan can boost its national attraction as a destination of gastronomic tourism. Linking wine with Agro tourism will enlarge both places visited and seasonal of arrivals, since this will create a year-round attraction. Income generation potential should consider how viniculture for tourism stimulates parallel productions for consumption based on grapes (including vinegars, dried fruits and sweets), horticulture and other sales of natural products. Viniculture can improve the outlook and therefore the “character” of landscapes, creating wine routes according to European models, successfully applied in Georgia. This increases local appeal to tourists. With its extended lands cultivated with grapes echoes the winemaking regions of central Europe. Parkent district presents itself as an ideal wine, tourism and gastronomy cluster.

Conclusions and recommendations

The above examples show the potential of this sector for the future of Uzbekistan, increasing the well-being of rural households. Urban street-food will raise the attractiveness of Uzbek cities, developing Agritourism possibly reducing rural-urban migration and rural poverty by creating sustainable livelihoods.

However, the effective creation of proposed gastro-tourism clusters requires a solid national policy frameworks intended to:

- Create needed infrastructure to support agro- gastro-tourism (supporting agriculture in general).
- Introduce incentives to support agro-ecotourism, including legislation and regulations.
- Taking a long-term perspective involves local communities in creating tourism-sustained economies; empowering them with a strong voice in the clusters' design; raising their awareness related to heritage; and, increasing their readiness to host visitors.
- Build capacities training people to present food in its cultural dimension, especially among rural populations, for sustainability of the whole process.
- Design routes linking peoples and territories with their gastronomic heritage.

Aslanova D. X., Tashova M. Kh. (2019), “Implementation of the cluster approach for the development of agro ecotourism in the village of Mirankul” in Proceedings of the International Conference on “Tourism and education: ways of their interaction and development”, Samarkand: “Silk Road” International University of Tourism, 85-91

- Display food and wine culture as one of the main ingredients of Uzbekistan branding as a tourist destination.

Gastro-tourism's development will likely require working actively with development partners. From this perspective, supporting a beverage industry may raise questions. However, there is the positive example of Georgia, where supporting wine-making became an integral part of the EBRD's strategy to support agriculture by empowering rural communities to develop their entrepreneurial capacities.⁶

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⁶ "EU and EBRD help boost Georgia's agritourism potential", 04/07/2018 ; https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/education/47879/eu-and-ebrd-help-boost-georgia%E2%80%99s-agritourism-potential_en