

Cultural Heritage Management in Gastronomy Tourism: The Traditional Culinary Heritage of Azerbaijan (The Case of Karabakh)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the possibilities of preserving and sustainably developing the rich culinary heritage of the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan within the framework of gastronomy tourism. The primary aim of the study is to evaluate the protection of Karabakh cuisine as an example of intangible cultural heritage and its integration into the tourism sector. The research methodology is based on the analysis of academic literature, field observations, informal interviews, and a sociocultural approach. The findings demonstrate that while Karabakh cuisine possesses high tourism potential, it simultaneously plays a vital role in maintaining national cultural identity.

Interviews and field observations conducted within the study revealed that although local communities, restaurant owners, and farmers strive to preserve traditional recipes, the main obstacles remain product supply limitations, educational deficiencies, and restricted state support. At the same time, the promotion of cuisine through festivals and social media has increased tourist interest and stimulated the local economy.

Consequently, strategic directions have been identified to ensure the sustainability of Karabakh cuisine: expanding promotion through international platforms such as UNESCO, systematic documentation of traditional recipes, raising awareness among local communities, applying sustainable tourism strategies, and encouraging the younger generation to become carriers of this heritage. This approach serves both the preservation of cultural identity and the socio-economic development of the region. Future research should specifically investigate the social, cultural, and economic impacts of gastronomy tourism on consumer groups.

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage, Gastronomy tourism, Karabakh cuisine.

Introduction

Culture is one of the essential elements that enables people to live together by sharing both material and spiritual values. A part of culture that sustains society is the tradition of food and beverage (Eren & Sezgin, 2017). Food culture is shaped by a society's geographical position, economic circumstances, and historical processes. This indicates that food traditions are directly connected to lifestyle (Aslan, Güneren & Çoban, 2014).

The most basic human need is nutrition; however, food and beverage culture varies from person to person and from region to region (Bekar & Zağralı, 2015, p. 41). In order to transfer this culture to future generations, dietary behaviors must be correctly learned and transmitted (Türk & Şahin, 2004). Furthermore, food and beverage culture not only emphasizes eating habits but also complements other cultural practices such as weddings and ceremonies (religious or festive) (Sağır, 2012).

Every society has its own culinary culture, shaped by its history, geographical structure, and agricultural production. These culinary cultures have evolved under the influence of numerous factors throughout history (Eren & Sezgin, 2017). Culinary culture encompasses food and beverages suited to the diet of people living in a certain geography, processes such as cooking and preservation, related practices, utensils and equipment used, table manners, and beliefs (Akdemir & Selçuk, 2017; Keskin, 2012). In other words, culinary culture reflects a region's unique cultural structure: the preparation, cooking, consumption, storage, and serving of food, as well as kitchen architecture, rituals, tools, and practices shaped within this context (Toksöz & Aras, 2016). Local foods and drinks are inseparable parts of culture and provide important insights into national cuisines (Eren & Sezgin, 2017). They also reflect traditions, economic conditions, and unique preparation and presentation styles (Altusaban et al., 2016).

Nearly every nation in the world possesses a unique culinary culture created according to its social traditions and dietary habits (Akdemir & Selçuk, 2017). While each cuisine develops within its own cultural framework, it is also influenced by neighboring regions. For instance, in the history of gastronomy, the earliest known culinary culture emerged in Mesopotamia and, through historical transformations, developed into two major streams: Chinese and Asian cuisine. Egyptian cuisine influenced Greek cuisine; Greek cuisine formed the basis of Roman cuisine; Roman cuisine became the foundation of French cuisine; and English cuisine was significantly shaped by Ancient Greek culinary traditions (Düzgün & Özkaya, 2015).

For a cuisine to hold an important place worldwide, it must have certain qualities: recognition, originality, and diversity. Recognition refers to its visibility and application by other cultures; originality refers to dishes and preparation methods that are entirely unique; and diversity refers to the number of different dishes within a cuisine (Mankan, 2012). Nations with rich culinary traditions thus enjoy significant advantages (Altusaban et al., 2016).

Cultural heritage is not limited to monuments and artifacts; it also includes traditions, language, music, and gastronomic values passed from generation to generation. Azerbaijan stands out with its rich and diverse culinary heritage. In particular, the Karabakh region occupies a special place in gastronomy tourism due to its unique cuisine, deep historical roots, and distinctive flavors. Preserving and promoting these traditions within the framework of gastronomy tourism aims not only to disseminate Azerbaijani culture but also to contribute to the socio-economic development of the region (Bayramov, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). This study will examine Azerbaijani cuisine, particularly the Karabakh culinary heritage, which is internationally recognized for its authenticity and diversity.

1. Gastronomy Tourism and Cultural Heritage Management

The word *gastronomy* derives from the Greek terms *gastros* (stomach) and *nomos* (law, rule). However, beyond its literal definition, it is more meaningful to interpret what the concept represents and the fields it encompasses (Altinel, 2014). While in many sources gastronomy is defined as the art of eating and drinking, in reality it is directly connected to sciences such as chemistry, literature, biology, geology, history, music, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and medicine. In the definitions provided by various scholars, gastronomy has been described as “the study of good food and drink that transforms eating and drinking culture into an art” (Kivela & Crofts, 2006).

Gastronomy tourism is a form of tourism that can be practiced year-round, making it a powerful tool in destination marketing. As such, destinations are able to benefit from economic and socio-cultural advantages throughout the entire year. Research conducted in European Union member and candidate countries demonstrates that gastronomy tourism significantly contributes to national economies in terms of the number of enterprises, employment, and added value. For destinations unable to rely on the traditional “sea, sun, and sand” model, gastronomy tourism provides an

effective alternative. It creates distinctive value for destinations and fosters the development of unique markets (Kivela et al., 2005). Considered a part of cultural tourism, gastronomy tourism simultaneously represents one of the fastest growing alternative tourism types worldwide, expanding beyond the limits of mass tourism. Diversifying tourism products, meeting the growing demand for special interest tourism, and increasing competitiveness in a globalized environment all provide significant benefits for destinations, enterprises, and national economies.

Gastronomy tourism, or culinary tourism, is defined as a type of travel strongly motivated by the desire to experience unique food and beverages (Kesici, 2012; Harrington & Ottenbacher, 2010). Today, gastro-tourists travel to different regions to enjoy unique, memorable, and authentic gastronomic experiences. Consequently, many destinations with rich culinary traditions develop and promote their regional cuisines in order to ensure cultural continuity, meet contemporary tourist expectations, and provide economic value.

In today's context, local gastronomy has become one of the most significant assets for tourism-related activities. To ensure the preservation and sustainability of cultural diversity, both national and international organizations record and safeguard local gastronomic values. Gastronomy can be understood as the set of features that distinguish a country's or region's cuisine, including dishes, eating habits, and cooking methods (Cömert & Özkaya, 2014).

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines gastronomy tourism as encompassing a range of entertaining and experiential food-related activities at gastronomic destinations. These include food tours, festivals, markets, visits to food producers, culinary exhibitions, cooking demonstrations, and opportunities to taste authentic cuisine. Kozak (2002) emphasizes that cooking methods using local products are highly significant for destinations and food service establishments; traditional dishes become popular, while customer expectations increasingly lean toward exotic and nostalgic food depending on the region. Thus, cultural tourism extends beyond visits to museums, historical sites, and art galleries, incorporating culinary experiences that allow visitors to taste and learn about a destination's food culture (Santich, 2004). The importance of gastronomy and culinary richness as a tourism product is growing daily, and gastronomic experiences are becoming one of the most important activities for tourists.

The primary motivations for gastronomy tourism include tasting specific dishes or witnessing the production stages of food by visiting local or regional sites, food producers, restaurants, food festivals, and culinary venues (Deveci et al., 2013). Guzman and Canizares (2011) identify four main motivations among participants in gastronomy tourism:

- **Physical motivation:** Food is indispensable for life, and tourists seek food to live or to enrich their travel experiences.
- **Cultural motivation:** Tourists eat to learn about a culture. In this sense, simple local products are sufficient to motivate them. Therefore, visits to production sites, restaurants, and festivals where local dishes are served play a crucial role.
- **Social motivation:** Tourists actively participate in gastronomy-related activities, which fulfills their need for social interaction.
- **Prestige motivation:** Tourists share their experiences, thereby gaining prestige and recognition.

According to Öney (2013), communication is one of the central themes of heritage. Heritage management and policy-making efforts can be traced back to the nineteenth century. A review of the historical development of heritage preservation shows that throughout the twentieth century, the “Eurocentric preservation” approach emphasized the protection of nations’ power and historical past through safeguarding heritage elements. At that time, the focus was primarily on preserving the physical aspects of a region’s heritage. Cultural activities carried out in mosques, castles, historic villages, or among communities living in those lands were not considered part of heritage. However, with global changes, the necessity to safeguard cultural remnants at local, national, and international levels has become a pressing issue.

2. Azerbaijani Culinary Heritage and the Role of the Karabakh Region

Azerbaijan’s culinary culture is distinguished by its geographical and ethnic diversity, which gives it unique characteristics. The Karabakh region, in particular, has played a crucial role in the development of Azerbaijani cuisine due to its historical and cultural richness. The traditional recipes prepared in this region are passed down through generations and cooked using time-honored techniques. This heritage adds a distinctive taste and value to the dishes (Azerbaijan National Culinary Center, 2019).

Geographically located in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan has been influenced by the cultures of its neighboring countries. As a Turkic state, Azerbaijani cuisine often demonstrates similarities with Persian cuisine in terms of cooking methods and flavor profiles. Throughout history, Azerbaijan has been exposed to the cultural influences of Persians, Arabs, Mongols, and Russians, which are reflected in its culinary traditions. Furthermore, the country's possession of nine different climate zones contributes to its diverse and rich culinary culture (Pohlyobkin, 2004, p.184).

Azerbaijani cuisine boasts more than 30 varieties of dolma and over 100 types of plov. This abundance is attributed to its location along the Silk Road, where cultural exchanges enriched its culinary repertoire. Signature dishes include *khash*, *bozbash*, *dosheme plov*, and *khan plov* (Toygar & Toygar, 2016a).

While Azerbaijanis frequently use raisins and saffron in their cooking, Turkish cuisine relies heavily on olive oil—something rarely found in Azerbaijani dishes. Professional chefs in Azerbaijan are called *ashbash*, and dishes are generally named according to their preparation methods. Reflecting the country's regional diversity, Azerbaijani cuisine is not limited to pastries and meat dishes but also includes various types of fish-based meals (Atilla, 2012).

Karabakh cuisine represents an integral part of the national culinary culture, yet it displays distinctive features due to local conditions. For example, marine fish are not used; instead, freshwater fish occupy a special place in the region's gastronomy (Amirarslanov, 2011).

Historically, Karabakh's rich agricultural culture and the extensive use of wild herbs stand out. Wild plants and fruits are incorporated not only into savory dishes but also into desserts. The Karabakh cuisine is particularly noted for its reliance on local ingredients and its emphasis on hospitality (Nabibayli, 2008; Vagif, 1988).

To preserve and promote this culinary heritage, Azerbaijan has organized various initiatives. For instance, in 2011, Karabakh chefs participated in the National Cuisine Festival of Azerbaijan, where they achieved significant success (Amirarslanov, 2011).

Finally, following the civil conflict, many Karabakh refugees have continued to live under difficult conditions, yet they still nurture memories and dreams associated with their traditional cuisine. Historically, Karabakh

has embodied a rich cultural heritage, and safeguarding this legacy has always remained a priority (Eliyev, 1989).

3. UNESCO and Azerbaijan's Culinary Heritage

Within the framework of the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* of UNESCO, Azerbaijani cuisine has also been internationally recognized and acknowledged as worthy of preservation. The culinary heritage of the Karabakh region, presented in accordance with UNESCO's preservation standards, plays an important role in introducing Azerbaijani cultural heritage to the world (UNESCO, 2021). Examples include *lavash*, *dolma*, *tandir bread*, and the *tea culture*.

Recognition of Lavash by UNESCO: Although in 2014 lavash was initially listed as part of Armenian cuisine, in 2016 Azerbaijan, Turkey, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan jointly submitted the nomination "Lavash, Katyrma, Jupka, Yufka — the preparation, meaning, and sharing culture of flatbread," which was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This recognition emphasized the cultural significance of the tradition of preparing and sharing thin bread (UNESCO, 2014, 2016).

Recognition of Dolma by UNESCO: In 2017, following Azerbaijan's nomination, the "Dolma making and sharing tradition" was included in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This inscription underscored the importance of dolma as an element of cultural identity (UNESCO, 2017).

Recognition of Tea Culture by UNESCO: Tea culture in Azerbaijan and Turkey is considered a symbol of hospitality, social interaction, and the commemoration of important moments in community life. Although both countries cultivate and consume different types of tea, black tea remains predominant. Tea is brewed in a variety of teapots produced through traditional craftsmanship and is served freshly brewed in pear-shaped glasses. These glasses may be made of glass, porcelain, faience, or silver. Tea is often accompanied by sweets, sugar, lemon slices, jams, and dried fruits. In certain Azerbaijani regions, cinnamon, ginger, and thyme are added to enrich the flavor. Tea culture forms an integral part of the daily lives of people from all social groups, creating a strong sense of cultural identity. The bearers of this tradition include tea farmers and harvesters, tea house owners, tea brewers, and artisans producing utensils, containers, and sweets associated with tea culture (UNESCO, 2022).

Recognition of Tandir Bread by UNESCO: In December 2024, UNESCO inscribed Azerbaijan's "Tandir bread baking tradition" on the Intangible Cultural Heritage List. Tandir bread, baked in a special clay oven (*tandir*), is distinguished by its unique flavor and texture. This tradition constitutes an important part of Azerbaijan's hospitality and culinary culture (UNESCO, 2024).

4. Strategies for Gastronomy Tourism

Gastronomy tourism is strengthened through strategies aimed at introducing and developing the unique culinary traditions of a destination. Some of the main strategies are explained in detail below:

Destination Marketing and Branding: Destination marketing is an effective tool for promoting local flavors and culinary traditions. By presenting the traditional dishes of Karabakh within the framework of gastronomy tourism, the region's attractiveness as a destination can be enhanced (Cohen & Avieli, 2004).

Use of Local Products and Preservation of Traditional Flavors: The sustainability of gastronomy tourism is ensured by the use of local and ecologically clean products. Utilizing local ingredients in Karabakh's traditional recipes will contribute to the preservation of authentic flavors (Sims, 2009).

Sustainable Tourism Practices: Sustainable tourism is implemented through the protection of natural resources and environmentally responsible practices. The adoption of sustainable approaches in Karabakh's tourism activities can also support the preservation of culinary heritage (Hjalager, 2010).

Preservation and Continuity of Karabakh's Culinary Heritage: Safeguarding the culinary heritage of Karabakh is of great importance for maintaining cultural identity. The following steps can contribute to this goal:

- **Local Community Participation and Awareness:** Raising awareness among the local population and involving them in the process of preserving Karabakh's traditional culinary culture is crucial. Such participation builds consciousness for heritage protection while simultaneously supporting the local economy (Sims, 2009).

- **Documentation of Traditional Recipes:** Recording the recipes unique to Karabakh cuisine plays a significant role in transmitting this heritage to future generations. Through this process, tourists can also experience authentic gastronomic traditions (Cohen & Avieli, 2004).
- **Tourist Guidance and Experiential Tours:** Gastronomy tours introducing Karabakh cuisine provide an ideal means of presenting the region's culinary culture to tourists. These tours support the development of gastronomy tourism by combining educational and experiential approaches (Hjalager, 2010).

5. Preservation and Sustainability of Karabakh's Culinary Heritage

Safeguarding and Transmission of Heritage:

The preservation of Karabakh's culinary heritage requires attention to several key aspects. One of the most important is the documentation of local culinary traditions in written and visual formats. Academic studies, cookbooks, and documentary films form essential components of this process. In addition, organizing training courses and masterclasses on the preparation of traditional dishes contributes to safeguarding this knowledge. Supporting local farms and prioritizing the production of organic food also help protect the authenticity of culinary heritage. To preserve traditional ingredients, coordinated work between agriculture and the food industry is essential (Mammadov, 2022).

Gastronomy Tourism and Sustainable Development:

Gastronomy tourism plays a vital role in the preservation of Karabakh cuisine. Introducing local cuisine and serving traditional dishes to tourists not only generates economic income but also promotes cultural heritage. For this reason, the encouragement of gastronomy festivals, culinary exhibitions, and thematic restaurants is highly important. Within the framework of sustainable development, the involvement of local communities and younger generations is crucial. Establishing professional culinary education programs and enabling master chefs to transfer their knowledge to the younger generation ensure the sustainability of culinary traditions (Hasanova & Guliyev, 2020).

Challenges and Prospects:

One of the major challenges in preserving Karabakh's culinary heritage is the gradual loss of traditional dishes due to urbanization and global

influences. The transformation of modern dietary habits and the spread of fast-food culture can marginalize local cuisine. Addressing this issue requires the expansion of educational programs and promotional activities (Aliyeva, 2021).

At the same time, strategies must be developed for the international recognition of Karabakh cuisine. Steps toward inclusion in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list are of great importance, as is conducting further academic research in this field (UNESCO, 2023).

6. Method

This research employs qualitative methods to investigate the preservation and sustainable development of Azerbaijan's traditional culinary heritage, with a particular focus on the Karabakh region within the framework of gastronomy tourism. The following methods were applied:

Literature Analysis: Scientific sources on gastronomy tourism, intangible cultural heritage, and Azerbaijani cuisine, as well as reports from international organizations (UNESCO, UNWTO, etc.), were examined. Academic articles, monographs, and government policy documents were analyzed to study Karabakh cuisine in its historical context.

Comparative Analysis: Strategies aimed at preserving Azerbaijan's culinary heritage were compared with international practices to identify best practices. Parallels were drawn between Azerbaijani culinary elements inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List (lavash, dolma, tea culture, etc.) and the gastronomic heritage of other regions.

Field Research and Observations: The activities of restaurants, culinary festivals, and local production enterprises in the Karabakh region were directly observed. Informal interviews were conducted with farmers and chefs who use traditional methods of food production and presentation.

Sociocultural Approach: The role of local communities and tourism professionals in the preservation and sustainability of gastronomic heritage was assessed. The study also analyzed the contribution of regional culinary culture to socio-cultural identity and examined the influence of modern dietary habits.

6.2. Interview Analysis

Table 1. Interview Results

Participant Group	Main Themes	Respondents' Answers	Recurring Ideas and Analysis
Restaurant Owners	Traditional dishes	Dolma, <i>piti</i> , <i>qutab</i> , <i>plov</i>	Traditional Karabakh dishes are the most frequently served.
	Product supply	Local farms and markets	Use of local products is essential, but stable supply remains problematic.
	Tourist interest	Foreign tourists prefer dolma and <i>plov</i> ; locals prefer <i>piti</i> and <i>qutab</i>	Preferences differ between foreign and local tourists.
	Main challenges	Product shortages; dishes require advanced skills	Reliable supply and preparation complexity are major issues.
	Suggestions	Culinary festivals and social media promotion	Festivals and online advertising are crucial for gastronomy tourism.
Festival Organizers	Dishes presented	Dolma, <i>piti</i> , <i>qutab</i> , <i>plov</i>	Traditional meals are mainly introduced at festivals.
	Tourist reactions	Very positive; influenced by style of presentation	Taste and visual appeal attract visitors.
	Economic impact	Contributes to local community and tourism development	Festivals improve local community economies.
	International promotion	Festivals introduce Karabakh cuisine globally	Festivals are vital for international recognition.
	Sustainability issues	Need for sponsors and government support	Without state/sponsor support, festivals are not sustainable.
Farmers	Products produced	Grape leaves, rice, herbs	Key ingredients for Karabakh cuisine are cultivated.
	Quality assurance	Use of natural fertilizers, eco-friendly conditions	Eco-friendly methods ensure product quality.
	Collaboration	Cooperation with restaurants and festivals	Farmers work closely with restaurants and organizers.
	Challenges	Weak state support, poor product promotion	More support is needed from government and NGOs.

Chefs	Characteristics	Rich spices, unique cooking methods	Karabakh cuisine differs from other regions.
	Challenges	Some ingredients are unavailable; preparation is complex	Traditional dishes require time and high-level skills.
	Tourist interest	Visitors are impressed by flavor and presentation	Cuisine is positively received by tourists.
	Training of young chefs	Masterclasses and training are needed	Culinary education for younger generations should be enhanced.
	International integration	Possible to integrate Karabakh cuisine with global gastronomy	Modern techniques can adapt it to international cuisine.

- **Recurring Problems:** Respondents highlighted shortages of quality products, limited government and sponsor support, and the complexity of preparing certain traditional dishes.
- **Opportunities for Development:** Broad promotion of Karabakh cuisine is possible through festivals and social media marketing.
- **Economic Impact:** Gastronomy tourism and festivals create economic benefits for local communities.
- **Tourist Preferences:** Foreign tourists prefer *dolma* and *plov*, while local tourists tend to choose *piti* and *qutab*.

CONCLUSION

The preservation and sustainable development of Karabakh’s culinary heritage is of great importance for maintaining one of the richest elements of Azerbaijani culture. Research findings indicate that in order to prevent the loss of traditional food culture, a number of measures must be implemented. These include the development of gastronomy tourism, increased use of local products, stronger support from government and non-governmental organizations, and the preparation of international promotion strategies.

The study has revealed that Azerbaijani culinary elements already included in UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage List—such as *lavash*, *dolma*, and *tea culture*—can serve as exemplary mechanisms for promoting Karabakh cuisine internationally. Building on these experiences, additional intangible heritage elements related to Karabakh cuisine should be documented and submitted to international organizations.

Moreover, the effective implementation of gastronomy tourism strategies can transform the Karabakh region into an attractive destination for culinary tourism. Increasing local community participation and encouraging them to preserve traditional culinary practices are essential steps for ensuring the transmission of this heritage to future generations. Educational programs and culinary festivals can also make significant contributions to this process.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Karabakh cuisine is an important part of Azerbaijan's cultural identity, and its preservation and promotion must be pursued not only at the local level but also on an international scale. Future research should focus on deeper empirical studies and the broader examination of the economic dimensions of gastronomy tourism. Since the present interviews were conducted with producers, it is recommended that future studies also include consumers in order to compare results and obtain more comprehensive insights for developing cultural heritage and enhancing international recognition.

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