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Managing Culinary Heritage as an Economic Asset: Opportunities and Challenges for Emerging Tourist Destinations



ABSTRACT

Objective: The main objective of this study was to examine how culinary heritage is perceived and utilized in the context of tourism development in Poland and to identify factors influencing its economic and image potential.

Methodology: An online CAWI survey was conducted among two groups of respondents. The questionnaire comprised 28 closed and 4 open questions grouped into four thematic blocks: frequency and forms of participation in food-related tourism activities, evaluation of authenticity and quality of culinary offerings, motivational drivers (cognitive, hedonic, social), and perceived influence of culinary experiences on overall destination image.

Findings: Applying mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) enabled a comprehensive view of how culinary heritage is perceived and used in Poland as a tourism and economic resource. The quantitative component captured the structure of participation in food tourism, the main motivations of tourists, and the assessments of the gastronomic offer. The qualitative component deepened our understanding of meanings, emotions, and narratives related to gastronomy – from the perspectives of both tourists and industry stakeholders. The results show that food tourism in Poland is in a phase of dynamic growth while a model of cooperation between the public, private, and social sectors is taking shape.

Value Added: The literature and practical examples indicate that skillful management of culinary heritage can bring measurable economic benefits. In regions where integrated strategies for promoting cuisine have been implemented (e.g., Italy, France, South Korea), one observes growth in gastronomy sector employment, increased export value of regional products, and greater tourist interest in local offerings. In Poland, this potential is only beginning to reveal itself, yet its impact is already visible in rural development, the revitalization of local markets, and rising interest in organic agriculture and regional culture.

Recommendations: To fully leverage the potential of culinary heritage, it is necessary to create a coherent national strategy for food tourism, strengthen cross-sector cooperation, introduce systemic protective measures to safeguard the authenticity of traditional products against excessive commercialization, and promote cuisine as an element of public diplomacy.

Key words: culinary heritage, food tourism, destination governance, authenticity, economic asset, Poland

JEL codes: Z32, Z10, L83, O18

Introduction

In contemporary tourism economies, destinations compete not only through infrastructure and accessibility but increasingly through symbolic differentiation. As global mobility intensifies and digital platforms expose travelers to standardized representations of places, the distinctiveness of cultural identity becomes a strategic resource. Within this context, culinary heritage has emerged as one of the most visible and experientially accessible expressions of local culture. Food is not merely consumed; it is interpreted, narrated, photographed, shared, and remembered. It operates simultaneously as cultural artifact, economic commodity, and relational medium.

The growing prominence of gastronomy in tourism policy discourse has led to frequent assertions that culinary heritage constitutes an economic asset capable of stimulating regional development, strengthening nation brands, and enhancing destination competitiveness. However, while the symbolic and experiential value of food is widely acknowledged, the institutional conditions under which this value translates into measurable economic outcomes remain less clearly theorized. Cultural richness does not automatically produce economic performance. The transformation of culinary heritage into sustained

economic capital depends on governance structures, stakeholder coordination, strategic communication, and sustainability frameworks.

This tension between cultural value and economic translation is particularly visible in emerging tourist destinations. In this article, the notion of “emerging” is not understood exclusively in terms of visitor growth or infrastructure expansion. Rather, it denotes institutional emergence: contexts in which distinctive cultural resources exist and tourism demand is present, yet strategic coordination mechanisms, evaluation systems, and branding frameworks are still consolidating. In such settings, culinary heritage may possess strong symbolic resonance while lacking systematic integration into national or regional development strategies.

Poland offers a compelling case for examining this dynamic. The country’s culinary traditions reflect centuries of intercultural exchange shaped by shifting borders, migration flows, and agricultural practices. Regional cuisines vary significantly and are increasingly mobilized within festivals, culinary trails, and promotional campaigns. At the same time, tourism governance in Poland remains relatively decentralized, with regional initiatives often operating independently. This configuration provides fertile ground for exploring how culinary heritage is positioned between symbolic capital and economic ambition.

This study addresses the following research question: under what institutional and perceptual conditions can culinary heritage function as an economic asset in emerging tourist destinations? Rather than measuring macro-economic impact directly, the article adopts an exploratory mixed-method approach to examine tourist perceptions, motivational structures, and stakeholder perspectives on coordination and barriers. By integrating empirical findings with theoretical debates on authenticity, symbolic capital, governance, and sustainability, the study advances the concept of culinary heritage as a conditional economic asset – one whose economic potential is contingent upon institutional alignment.

Theoretical Framework

Culinary Heritage as Symbolic and Cultural Capital

Culinary heritage occupies a distinctive position within the broader category of intangible cultural heritage because it combines material and immaterial elements. Recipes, ingredients, and production techniques are tangible in form, yet their meaning derives from social memory, ritual practice, and intergenerational transmission. As UNESCO (2003) emphasizes, intangible heritage exists through performance and reproduction within communities. It is neither static nor detached from contemporary contexts.

From a sociological perspective, culinary practices can be interpreted through Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural and symbolic capital. Cultural capital encompasses embodied knowledge, aesthetic preferences, and competencies acquired through socialization. In the tourism contexts, local cuisine represents embodied cultural capital at a territorial scale. When recognized and valued by visitors, this capital may transform into symbolic capital – social recognition that enhances prestige and legitimacy.

However, symbolic capital does not automatically convert into economic capital. Bourdieu (1984) highlights that such conversion requires specific fields and institutional conditions. Applied to tourism, this suggests that culinary heritage generates economic value only when embedded within market structures and supported by legitimizing institutions. Without mechanisms for recognition, certification, branding, and distribution, symbolic appreciation may remain detached from measurable economic outcomes.

This distinction is crucial for avoiding simplistic assumptions that cultural uniqueness inherently produces economic development. Culinary heritage can enhance reputation and differentiation, but its economic translation depends on structured mediation.



Authenticity and the Tourist Gaze

Debates on authenticity provide further theoretical grounding. MacCannell (1973) argued that tourists seek authentic experiences as a reaction to modern alienation. Yet he also demonstrated that tourism settings frequently involve staged authenticity, where representations are curated for visitor consumption. Later, Wang (1999) expanded this framework by distinguishing objective authenticity from existential authenticity. The latter refers to the subjective feeling of authenticity experienced by tourists, independent of strict historical accuracy.

Recent syntheses (Ellis et al., 2018) emphasize the multidimensional nature of food tourism, encompassing cultural, experiential, and economic dimensions.

Culinary tourism often operates within this existential domain. Visitors may perceive a meal as authentic because it evokes emotional connection, hospitality, or perceived locality, even if recipes have evolved or adapted. Authenticity thus becomes relational and negotiated.

The economic implications of authenticity are complex. On one hand, authenticity enhances attractiveness and willingness to pay. On the other hand, commercialization risks diluting authenticity, leading to homogenization. Cohen and Avieli (2004) argue that tourism-driven adaptation of cuisine may alter local food practices to match visitor expectations. This dynamic generates tension between preservation and profitability.

Therefore, authenticity must be understood as both a resource and a constraint. It strengthens symbolic capital but imposes limits on commodification. Economic translation of culinary heritage requires careful management of this balance.

Food Tourism within the Experience Economy

The rise of food tourism is inseparable from the shift toward experiential consumption described by Pine and Gilmore (1999). In the experience economy, consumers seek memorable and emotionally engaging events rather than standardized goods. Gastronomy offers multisensory engagement combining taste, smell, narrative, and social interaction.

Richards (2015) emphasizes co-creation in contemporary gastronomic experiences. Visitors increasingly participate in workshops, farm visits, and storytelling events. These practices enhance perceived authenticity and deepen emotional engagement. From a value-creation perspective, co-creation expands the role of tourists from passive consumers to active participants.

However, experiential value alone does not guarantee economic resilience. Experiences must be embedded in supply chains and supported by organizational structures capable of sustaining quality and visibility. Hjalager (2010) highlights innovation as a driver of competitiveness in tourism, yet innovation requires coordination across actors. Recent scholarship further emphasizes the strategic positioning of food tourism within broader destination competitiveness debates, highlighting its role in differentiation and market resilience (Okumus, 2021).

Thus, experiential richness must intersect with managerial capacity for sustained economic impact. Forward-looking analyses further suggest that the future of food tourism will increasingly depend on authenticity management, digital storytelling, and integration of sustainability principles into destination strategies (Yeoman et al., 2020).

Destination Governance and Network Coordination

Tourism development occurs within multi-actor governance systems. Hall (2008) conceptualizes tourism planning as a process shaped by interactions between public authorities, private enterprises, and community stakeholders. Effective governance involves coordination, shared vision, and policy alignment.

Policy-oriented analyses also underline the growing institutionalization of gastronomy within national tourism strategies, particularly in contexts where governments actively integrate culinary heritage into destination marketing frameworks (UNWTO, 2019).

Dredge (2010) argues that fragmented governance structures may limit innovation and reduce strategic coherence. In decentralized systems, initiatives may emerge organically but lack cumulative integration. For culinary heritage, this



implies that local festivals, restaurants, and producers may operate successfully at a micro level while failing to generate macro-level economic effects.

Network theory suggests that relational capital among stakeholders influences competitiveness. Trust, information exchange, and collaborative platforms facilitate collective action. Without such networks, culinary initiatives risk duplication and inconsistent quality.

Therefore, governance constitutes a mediating variable between symbolic capital and economic outcomes. Culinary heritage becomes economically productive not solely because of its intrinsic qualities but because governance frameworks enable its coordination and scaling.

Nation Branding and Gastrodiplomacy

Cuisine increasingly functions within nation branding strategies. Anholt (2007) conceptualizes competitive identity as the strategic management of national reputation across economic and cultural domains. Food serves as an accessible representation of national identity, often transcending language barriers.

Rockower (2012) describes gastrodiplomacy as the deliberate use of cuisine to influence foreign publics and enhance soft power. Countries such as Thailand and South Korea have implemented state-supported programs promoting national cuisine abroad. These initiatives integrate tourism, agriculture, and foreign policy.

In such cases, culinary heritage operates within coordinated policy ecosystems. Branding, export promotion, and certification systems facilitate translation of cultural recognition into economic performance. The absence of similar integration may constrain economic leverage, even when culinary diversity is substantial.

Sustainability and the Limits of Commodification

Sustainable tourism frameworks (UNWTO, 2022) emphasize the need to align economic development with environmental responsibility and cultural preservation. Culinary tourism can support local agriculture and short supply chains,

enhancing regional resilience. However, scaling production to meet tourism demand may strain local ecosystems or encourage standardization.

The Slow Food movement (Petrini, 2003) advocates for balancing quality, locality, and fairness. This approach highlights the ethical dimension of culinary heritage management. Economic exploitation without cultural sensitivity may undermine long-term viability.

Hence, sustainability functions as a normative boundary condition. Culinary heritage may generate economic value only when commodification does not erode cultural legitimacy or environmental balance.

Conceptual Framing: Culinary Heritage as a Conditional Economic Asset

Building on the preceding theoretical discussion, culinary heritage can be conceptualized as a conditional economic asset. Unlike physical infrastructure, its economic potential depends on alignment among three dimensions: symbolic recognition, governance coordination, and sustainability integration.

Symbolic recognition emerges through authenticity and experiential engagement. Governance coordination enables scaling, branding, and market access. Sustainability integration ensures long-term legitimacy and resilience. Economic outcomes arise at the intersection of these dimensions.

This framing avoids deterministic assumptions that cultural uniqueness automatically produces development. Instead, it situates culinary heritage within a dynamic system where economic translation depends on institutional maturity.



Methodology

Research Design and Rationale

The study adopts a mixed-method exploratory design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. This design was selected to capture both the perceptual dimension of culinary heritage among tourists and the institutional dimension articulated by stakeholders involved in its management and promotion. Given the study's focus on conditional economic potential rather than direct macroeconomic measurement, the methodological strategy emphasizes triangulation of perspectives rather than statistical generalization.

The integration of methods serves two purposes. First, it enables examination of how culinary heritage influences destination image and tourist motivations at an experiential level. Second, it allows identification of governance-related barriers and coordination challenges that shape the institutional translation of symbolic value into economic opportunity.

Quantitative Component

The quantitative component consisted of a Computer-Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) survey conducted between May and August 2024. The final dataset included responses from 800 participants: 600 domestic tourists and 200 foreign visitors who had traveled in Poland within the preceding two years. The structure of the survey sample is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Structure of the survey sample

Variable	Category	N	%
Tourist type	Domestic	600	75.0
	Foreign	200	25.0
Gender	Female	464	58.0
	Male	336	42.0
Age group	18–24	128	16.0
	25–44	416	52.0
	45–60	224	28.0
	60+	32	4.0
Education	Secondary	248	31.0
	Bachelor's degree	304	38.0
	Master's degree or higher	248	31.0

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Participants were recruited via online travel communities, tourism-related social media groups, and targeted mailing lists of travel platforms. While the sampling strategy was non-probabilistic and voluntary, efforts were made to ensure heterogeneity with respect to age, gender, educational attainment, and travel frequency. The sample included respondents aged 18–65+, with the largest proportion in the 25–44 age group, reflecting active travel demographics.

The questionnaire comprised sections addressing:

- frequency and forms of participation in food-related tourism activities,
- evaluation of authenticity and quality of culinary offerings,
- motivational drivers (cognitive, hedonic, social),
- perceived influence of culinary experiences on overall destination image.

Responses were measured primarily on five-point Likert scales. Descriptive statistics were calculated to assess distribution patterns. Pearson correlation analysis was applied to examine the relationship between culinary evaluation scores and overall destination image ratings.



Although the survey sample was not statistically representative of all tourists visiting Poland, it provides indicative insights into prevailing tendencies. The voluntary online format may involve self-selection bias, as individuals with interest in gastronomy could be more likely to participate. Consequently, findings are interpreted cautiously and positioned within the exploratory scope of the study.

Qualitative Component

The qualitative component comprised fifteen semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) and three focus group interviews (FGIs). Interviewees included restaurateurs, regional tourism organization representatives, local government officials, and artisanal food producers. Research was conducted in Małopolskie, Kujawsko-Pomorskie, and Podkarpackie regions, selected due to their visible culinary initiatives and diversity of gastronomic traditions.

Interviews explored perceptions of culinary heritage, strategies for promotion and branding, forms of intersectoral cooperation, administrative challenges, and views on commercialization and sustainability. Discussions typically lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were recorded with participant consent.

Data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic coding. Initial open coding identified recurrent themes, followed by axial coding to establish relationships between authenticity, governance coordination, certification procedures, funding stability, and perceived economic impact. Thematic saturation was reached within the sample, as similar patterns emerged across regions.

Analytical Integration

Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred at the interpretative stage. Quantitative results provided patterns of perception and motivation, while qualitative narratives contextualized these patterns within institutional structures. This triangulated approach enhances internal validity and supports the conceptualization of culinary heritage as a relational and governance-dependent resource.

Results

Participation and Behavioral Patterns

Survey findings indicate that culinary engagement constitutes a significant component of travel experiences in Poland. Seventy-three percent of respondents reported participation in at least one food-related activity during recent travel. The most frequently reported activities included attendance at food festivals, visits to regional restaurants and agritourism farms, and purchase of traditional products at local markets.

Domestic and foreign respondents displayed comparable participation rates, though differences emerged in motivational emphasis. Foreign visitors more frequently emphasized cultural discovery and learning about local traditions, whereas domestic tourists more often highlighted pleasure, relaxation, and social interaction. These distinctions suggest differentiated positioning strategies for domestic versus international markets.

Average evaluation of Poland's culinary offer exceeded four points on a five-point scale, with diversity and perceived authenticity receiving the highest ratings. As shown in Table 2, perceived authenticity and overall destination image also received high mean scores.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of perceptual and motivational variables (5-point scale)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Overall evaluation of culinary offer	4.20	0.68
Perceived authenticity	4.10	0.72
Cognitive motivation	3.92	0.81
Hedonic motivation	3.84	0.76
Social motivation	3.55	0.88
Overall destination image	4.30	0.65

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Lower evaluations were associated with international promotion and availability of information in foreign languages, indicating potential communication gaps.

Culinary Experience and Destination Image

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong positive association ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$) between overall evaluation of culinary experiences and perception of Poland as an attractive tourist destination. The correlation results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Pearson correlation between culinary evaluation and destination image

Variable 1	Variable 2	r	p-value
Culinary offer evaluation	Destination image	0.68	< 0.001

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The empirical findings of this study indicate that respondents who rated culinary offerings highly were significantly more likely to perceive the destination as authentic, culturally rich, and welcoming. The correlation coefficient indicates a strong positive relationship; however, causality cannot be inferred from this association.

While similar relationships have been identified in Mediterranean and East Asian contexts, the current data confirm the relevance of this dynamic within Poland. However, it must be emphasized that the observed relationship concerns perceptual variables rather than direct economic indicators. The statistical association suggests image-building potential but does not quantify economic output.

Identity Narratives and Emotional Engagement

Qualitative analysis reveals that culinary heritage operates as a narrative medium linking individual memory with collective identity. Interview participants frequently referred to “returning to childhood flavors”, “preserving grandmother’s

recipes”, and “sharing tradition with visitors”. These narratives illustrate the existential authenticity described by Wang (1999), wherein authenticity is experienced emotionally rather than verified historically.

Food festivals were described as spaces of communal exchange rather than mere consumption venues. Producers emphasized storytelling as integral to visitor engagement. This narrative dimension contributes to symbolic capital formation, reinforcing perceptions of authenticity and locality.

However, the empirical material also demonstrates that storytelling remains largely localized. Few interviewees described coordinated national-level narratives integrating regional culinary identities within a unified framework. This fragmentation limits cumulative branding impact.

Governance Constraints and Institutional Gaps

Across interviews, fragmentation emerged as a recurrent theme.

As qualitative insights are context-specific and derived from selected regions, they should be understood as illustrative of institutional tendencies rather than exhaustive representations of national conditions.

Stakeholders reported limited cross-sector coordination, short-term funding cycles, and administrative complexity associated with certification of traditional products. Smaller producers expressed concerns regarding bureaucratic burdens and insufficient advisory support.

The absence of integrated monitoring systems linking culinary events to measurable economic indicators was also noted. While local initiatives often succeed in attracting visitors, systematic evaluation of economic spillovers – such as employment effects or supply chain integration – remains limited.

These findings align with destination governance literature emphasizing the importance of network coordination for scaling cultural assets. The Polish case illustrates a context in which symbolic and experiential potential exists, yet institutional alignment remains partial.



Discussion

From Symbolic Recognition to Economic Translation

The empirical findings confirm that culinary heritage in Poland possesses strong symbolic and experiential appeal. High evaluation scores and the statistically significant association between culinary satisfaction and overall destination image demonstrate that gastronomy functions as a key component of perceptual positioning. However, symbolic recognition alone does not constitute economic capitalization.

The distinction between symbolic capital and economic capital is analytically crucial. While respondents associate Polish cuisine with authenticity and hospitality, these perceptions must be embedded within structured economic systems to generate durable impact. In destinations such as Italy or France, culinary heritage has been institutionalized through protected designation systems, export frameworks, and coordinated national branding. In these contexts, symbolic capital is systematically converted into economic capital through governance mechanisms.

The Polish case illustrates an intermediate stage in this process. The conclusions drawn here are based on perceptual and narrative data rather than direct financial metrics, and therefore should be interpreted as indicative of structural conditions rather than as quantified economic effects. Symbolic recognition exists at the experiential level, yet institutional frameworks enabling systematic scaling remain fragmented. This supports the conceptual framing of culinary heritage as a conditional economic asset. The condition lies in governance alignment and strategic integration.

Authenticity, Commodification, and Institutional Maturity

The qualitative findings highlight a tension between authenticity preservation and commercialization. Stakeholders express pride in regional traditions while simultaneously seeking broader visibility. This tension reflects the broader debate in tourism studies regarding commodification of culture.

Cohen and Avieli (2004) caution that excessive adaptation to tourist expectations may dilute authenticity. However, complete resistance to commercialization may limit economic opportunity. The challenge for emerging destinations lies not in avoiding commodification altogether but in managing its boundaries.

Institutional maturity becomes decisive here. Mature governance systems develop quality standards, certification mechanisms, and coordinated branding strategies that preserve core cultural elements while enabling market integration. In contexts where governance is still consolidating, commercialization risks either superficial branding or administrative overload.

The Polish case suggests ongoing negotiation of this balance. Certification systems exist but are perceived as bureaucratically demanding. Local initiatives flourish, yet national coordination remains partial. The capacity to manage authenticity without overstandardization constitutes a central governance challenge.

Domestic versus International Positioning

Differences between domestic and foreign respondents reveal strategic implications.

Although the observed differences suggest distinct positioning strategies, the sample size of foreign respondents ($n = 200$) warrants cautious interpretation, particularly regarding subgroup generalization. Foreign tourists more frequently emphasize cultural discovery, while domestic tourists prioritize hedonic and social dimensions. This divergence suggests differentiated marketing strategies.

International positioning may benefit from emphasizing heritage narratives, intercultural history, and regional distinctiveness. Domestic marketing may focus on experiential pleasure and community engagement. Such segmentation requires integrated communication frameworks capable of tailoring narratives without fragmenting brand identity.

Failure to differentiate positioning may limit international competitiveness. The relatively lower ratings for multilingual information indicate unrealized potential in global outreach.



Conditional Economic Assets and Emerging Destinations

The concept of culinary heritage as a conditional economic asset contributes to broader debates on cultural resource management. Unlike physical infrastructure, intangible heritage cannot be constructed through financial investment alone. It requires relational trust, intergenerational continuity, and community legitimacy.

Emerging destinations are characterized by partial institutional consolidation. Cultural richness may be abundant, yet governance structures capable of scaling and monitoring impact are still evolving. In such contexts, overestimating immediate economic effects risks undermining credibility.

The present study demonstrates that economic translation depends on three intersecting dimensions: symbolic recognition, governance coordination, and sustainability integration. Absence of any one dimension weakens transformation capacity. This tripartite framing provides a conceptual model applicable beyond the Polish case.

Conclusions

The study set out to examine under what conditions culinary heritage can function as an economic asset in emerging tourist destinations. The empirical findings confirm that culinary experiences significantly shape destination image and generate strong perceptions of authenticity and cultural richness. However, the analysis also demonstrates that experiential value does not automatically translate into measurable economic outcomes.

Culinary heritage should therefore be understood as a conditional economic asset. Its economic potential emerges only when symbolic capital is supported by governance alignment, strategic coordination, and sustainability principles. In Poland, symbolic and experiential foundations are well developed, yet institutional integration remains in progress.

The contribution of this study lies in integrating anthropological perspectives on authenticity, resource-based theory, and destination governance literature

into a unified framework. By conceptualizing economic translation as contingent rather than automatic, the article offers a more nuanced interpretation of cultural resource management.

The framework proposed in this study may support strategic decision-making processes within destination management organizations.

Theoretical Implications

The findings advance theoretical discussions in three areas. First, they demonstrate that symbolic capital requires institutional mediation to become economically productive. Second, they highlight the relational nature of intangible heritage, which depends on community legitimacy rather than ownership. Third, they reconceptualize emerging destinations as institutionally maturing systems rather than merely developing markets.

Practical and Policy Implications

Policy frameworks aiming to leverage culinary heritage should prioritize coordination across ministries responsible for tourism, culture, and agriculture. Simplified certification systems, advisory support for small producers, and unified international communication strategies would strengthen economic translation.

Moreover, evaluation mechanisms linking culinary initiatives to economic indicators should be developed. Evidence-based monitoring would enhance credibility and strategic learning.

Limitations and Future Research

The exploratory design and non-probabilistic sample limit generalizability. Future research should incorporate longitudinal economic indicators and comparative analysis of governance models across countries. Further investigation into digital branding strategies and supply-chain integration would also enrich understanding of economic translation processes.

The correlation coefficient indicates a strong positive relationship; however, causality cannot be inferred from this association.

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