

OPTIMIZING PROACTIVE COLLABORATIVE AND COOPERATIVE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN FOOD SUPPLIERS AND RESTAURANTS

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Abstract. *Currently, agri-gastronomy and the “tourist-catering” subsector have an increasingly well-defined role in the realization and commercialization of goods and services offered in terms of food quality and systemic efficiency. This study aims to identify that tourist destinations and many local communities offer a variety of gastronomic products and services and that the supply sector in semi-structured and still needs improvements in quality, safety and a wider commercial network. The paper highlights the need for suppliers to reinvent themselves and create new market opportunities to benefit from rapid growth in key sectors of the integrated food system. A number of relational solutions are analyzed with the potential to generate an authentic cuisine based on tradition and sustainability, with strong elements of originality. Consequently, it is highlighted that the consolidated and optimized relationships in the producer-processor network may be able to ensure diversified and quality local products, which gives restaurants a competitive advantage in the post-pandemic recovery.*

Keywords: agri-gastronomy, food, catering, restaurants, tourism

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1. Introduction

Today's world is becoming a world of 'networks', where multiple integration with emergent effect (integronic dynamics) is becoming increasingly evident. Basically, the foundations are being laid for the world of tomorrow when pervasive 5G (not to mention 6G) technology will be capable of maximised optimisation and unprecedented increases in technical efficiency, economic efficiency and systemic effectiveness. This will theoretically lead to the awareness, highlighting and harnessing of Information (I) and the existential triad (together with Energy and Substance) in all fields of activity and in all actions. In practice, the most dramatic effect will be the generalisation of remote working and the paradigm shift in management.

In this context, based on the well-known phrase "*from farm to fork*", the present study is an attempt to structure the food supply network in the concrete direction of optimizing the relational convergence between suppliers and restaurants.

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We are based on the *concept of agro-gastronomy* [9] and related managerial elements, aiming at proactive, cooperative and collaborative relationships between agricultural producers, food processors and urban consumers, especially tourist restaurants.

The current situation shows that the variety of agri-food products and services and the supply sector is semi-structured in Romania and still needs improvements in quality, safety and a wider commercial network. There is a need for suppliers to reinvent themselves and create new market opportunities in order to benefit from rapid growth in some sectors and directions, such as zonal agri-food flow; in addition, to be able to provide restaurants with a competitive advantage in post-pandemic recovery [3, 8, 10, 12].

The approach of structuring and optimizing supplier-restaurant relations defines the clear need to expand and enrich the city's offer of tourist products and services, gastronomy and restaurants of great gastronomic interest, which plays a theoretical and applicative role in opening up new opportunities and prospects, thus improving competitiveness and helping the overall economy of the urban locality [6, 7, 13, 20, 25, 27], in this case the city of Brasov.

In the framework of cooperation relations between agri-food suppliers and restaurants, local government and various institutions recognise the value of gastronomy as a seal of authenticity and local identity, thus protecting products, promoting environmental awareness and the healthy and sustainable use of agri-food products, as well as stimulating interculturality and tourism [5, 24, 30, 33, 34].

COOPERATION and *COLLABORATION* refers to the management of the agrifood supply chain, which involves a large number of agents at all stages, i.e. from the area where the product originates, through the production system, processing, transformation and distribution, sale, to its inclusion in the dishes offered by restaurants. The collaborative network strengthens functional integration with suppliers, which strengthens and enhances the *sustainable management of restaurants*. Greater integration and positive synergies, between *external resources* offered by suppliers and *internal resources* of restaurants, practically aim at a competitive positioning [1, 14, 18, 21].

The basic objective of the paper is related to the idea of the tourist-catering sub-sector, where the research aims to highlight the importance of synergies and proactive collaborative and cooperative relationships between agri-food suppliers and restaurants. As a specific objective, the *idea of INTEGRATION of the agri-gastronomic system* is addressed, with the aim of finding solutions to optimise the network of suppliers and consumers (focused on restaurants), highlighting the regulatory aspects through cooperation and collaboration. The general principles at national level are adapted in the paper to the local level of Romanian cities, with examples in the municipality of Brasov, where the study aims to highlight and optimise the best opportunities to ensure high quality food for urban consumers and especially tourists.

A complementary objective is to inventory the typology of agro-food suppliers, as well as the socio-cultural appreciation of the resources of the rural territories as a whole, perceived as a set of material and immaterial elements related to production and the agricultural environment, inserted in the perception of a territorial collective heritage on *the suppliers - restaurants flow*, resulting in marks of the cultural identity of the territories analysed. In the given example, these are necessary to understand and highlight the convergence and synergy between agricultural producers, food processors, retailers and consumers, with a focus on the restaurant sector in the city of Brasov.

2. Materials and Methods

The study used a qualitative methodology in order to better understand this phenomenon through the perceptions, meanings and attitudes explained by the individuals or groups involved and thus to deduce its interpretative and theoretical structure [23].

Most of the information collected on the production supplied by farmers and processors, as well as restaurants and gastronomic tourism, focused on the analysis of demand (tourists-consumers) and the supply of agri-food raw materials needed to sustain the supply (chefs and restaurant managers).

Self-administered semi-structured questionnaires were used, consisting of open and closed questions in the case of restaurants, while suppliers answered the questions directly [23, 31].

To collect information on the structure and characteristics of the sector, the identification and inclusion of local products, references to suppliers and traditional dishes in the menus of these restaurants were considered.

3. Results and Discussions

The complexity of food supply networks in large urban agglomerations can be understood if we consider the basic structure of the food system [7, 9] (Fig. 1).

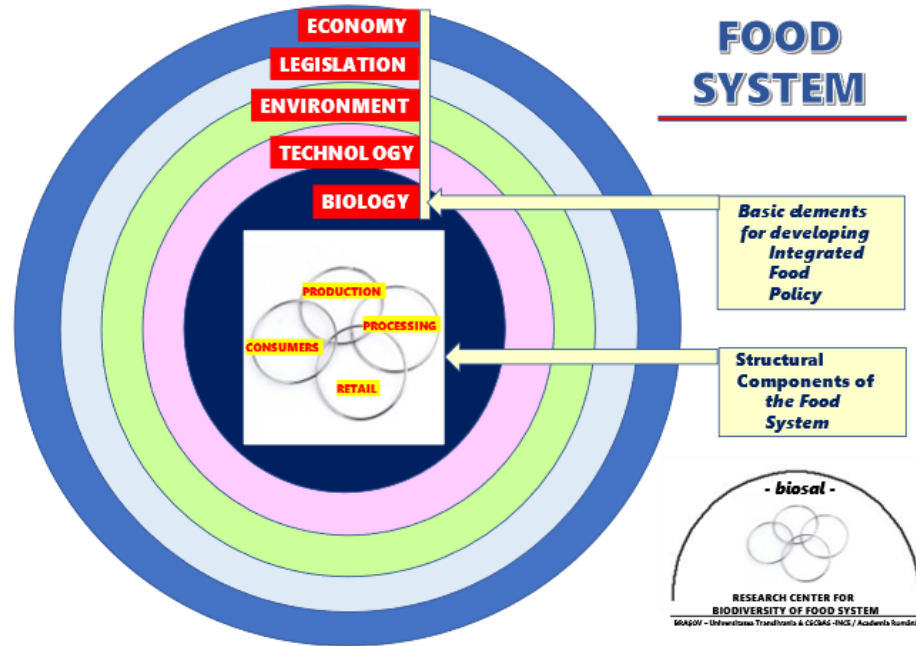


Fig. 1. Basic structure of food systems

The result shows that structural elements, in their functionality, can be optimised. Therefore, the opportunities and challenges faced by the agri-food and restaurant sectors should be considered in relation to the socio-economic, environmental, cultural, tourism and nutritional impacts resulting from the processes and synergies, which may be more or less unequal or functional, existing between the different production and marketing phases [14, 22, 26, 27].

One element of optimisation is, of course, the economic perspective. The profits that such establishments make by integrating the resources of local suppliers and maintaining fluid relationships, benefiting the local economy, are based on promoting the possibility of *purchasing smaller quantities of products, but fresher*, safer and of better quality, and ensuring customer satisfaction. It thus increases the level of confidence through consumer (including, tourist) recognition of the origin of the food they eat and how it is processed and produced

[8, 10, 17]. This implicitly leads to further cost reduction, minimising supply chain failures and identifying future changes in supply chain trends.

3.1. Applying the principles of supplier-restaurant network optimisation

Networks between agri-food suppliers and urban restaurants can be based especially on LOCAL PRODUCTS, which should be seen as another expression of *cultural capital* promoting social and economic benefits in rural or peri-urban areas [29]. This aims to elicit individual sensory perception in customers and influence their experience, as well as make clear the socio-environmental responsibility of the restaurant. The action is achieved by offering a *food biodiversity* that includes both locally grown or farmed species and food from wild flora or game [8, 19, 32].

The optimization is first based on the topic blocks and corresponding items (judgement terms) and indicators used in various scientific papers [10, 23], the most relevant of which are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Criteria for choosing suppliers

<i>Crt. no.</i>	<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Specification</i>
1	Supplier certification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be validated by "eco", "bio", or "geo" certification;
2	Raw material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • restaurants should have traditionally processed raw materials from the local area (in this case from Brasov);
3	Delivery mode	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fast and functional delivery;
4	Supplier location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the supplier's headquarters must be located in the area of the city under consideration (here the Brasov area and the surrounding areas);
5	Dynamics of market adaptation of the supplier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the availability of products that other suppliers lacked;
6	Contractual requirements of restaurants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the fact that suppliers actually have food quality, commercial or environmental certificates.

The process of optimising cooperation between agri-food firms and consumers, in this case restaurants, is being carried out in stages. First of all, it is necessary to collect the information needed to highlight the cooperation between the members of the network, which requires the use of questions and issues contained in questionnaires, which are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes and typology of questionnaires

<i>Crt no.</i>	<i>Main thematic blocks (Providers)</i>	<i>Indicators (to be met)</i>
1.	Agri-food products delivered to restaurants	➤ Local origin, types of production, artisanal/traditional qualities, tangible and intangible values
2.	Certificates or awards for product quality	➤ Denominations of origin, geographical indicators, etc.
3.	Restaurants supplied	➤ Types and commercial orientation, consumption of local products, certified products, gastronomic skill level
4.	Opinions on their current commercial attitude	➤ Sales volume, potential and demand for local products, future prospects, professional and personal relations with restaurants, degree of collaboration
5.	Typology of demand for agri-food products from restaurants	➤ products, inclusion in menus, seasonality of sales and products, etc.
<i>Crt. No.</i>	<i>Main thematic blocks (Restaurants)</i>	<i>Indicators</i>
1.	Agri-food products used	➤ Origin, types, qualities, quality certificates or awards, particularities and characteristics, influence of demand on choice
2.	Suppliers normally used	➤ Types of suppliers, business structure, wholesaler, retailer, trade and professional relationships, degree of collaboration
3.	Menus and dishes (type of cuisine, tangible and intangible values)	➤ Quality and variety, characteristics, inclusion of traditional products and traditional recipes, prices, consumer demand behaviour
4.	Commercial activity of the catering establishment	➤ Volume and current prospects, impact on local development of gastronomic tourism. Difficulties and problems

It can be seen that the fruitful synergy that exists between 'suppliers' and 'restaurants' is important when identifying operational and distribution problems and difficulties, wherever they may arise. This underlines the direction of optimisation regarding the importance of identifying and understanding the relationships between all those agents that are part of the gastronomic tourism value chain (network).

The optimisation methodology indicates that changes and improvements are needed in the management of restaurants, the sourcing of local agri-food products and the management of gastronomic tourism by the public sector through

advertising, marketing, product and attraction design and the provision of support to restaurants [2, 4, 16]. We refer, for example, to support through an appropriate food and fiscal policy of local government. In this respect, we believe that **URBAN FOOD, especially on the tourist front**, can contribute to increasing the demand for locally certified products and the sustainability of agriculture, rural areas and food systems in general.

3.2. Local agri-food products and their integration in the offer of Brasov restaurants

In addition to the city's vast historical, architectural and cultural heritage, tourists are also very satisfied with **Brasov's gastronomy**. From traditional taverns in the courtyards of typical Brasov houses to tourist restaurants offering mountain, traditional or international dishes, local gastronomy also includes a lot of creativity. For example, "socially and environmentally responsible" restaurants increasingly offer a more personal touch and guarantee better nutritional and sensory quality, unique experiences, value for money, accessibility and food safety. Thus, the *restaurant menu* becomes fundamental in communicating with the customer.

One way forward would be for new fast food trends to be *disconnected* from local agri-food products and their roots, and to enter specialised networks. There is growing interest in the certified quality and geographical origin of agri-food products, as well as the differentiated agro-ecological and territorial criteria used in their production and preparation [8, 11]. It should be noted that these changes are taking place in a context where tourist restaurants are trying to reinvent themselves and position themselves both as a high-quality gastronomic experience and as an authentic leisure experience.

Consumers in general and tourists in particular are increasingly interested in taste, texture, freshness, food safety, traditional production methods and overall quality as differentiating values in a market based on quality certificates and marketing seals as well as value for money. In principle, territorial products should be seen as another expression of cultural capital that promotes social and economic benefits in rural or peri-urban areas [15, 28]. In this sense, concretely, the supply base is the local agri-food product of the area of the *Curving Carpathians and Țara Bârsei*, i.e. **mountain products** from the urban, metropolitan and agrosilvopastoral mountain and depression area with the municipality of Braşov at its core.

It is essential to have a clear perception of QUALITY, which has become an extremely attractive resource in the tourist imagination of a city (we now exemplify Brasov) that can boast a rich culinary heritage, but also the prospect of highlighting a diversified **mountain gastronomy**.

THE MOUNTAIN PRODUCT within the "local product" group must be understood as belonging to a defined geographical region (in this case the mountain area), with specific territorial qualities which condition the natural characteristics of its agri-food production and which is the result of a specific historical-cultural environment in which techniques, knowledge, cultural experiences or traditions have had an impact on the socio-economic development of the area and its links with the local community.

An eloquent example is mountain milk (Fig.2)

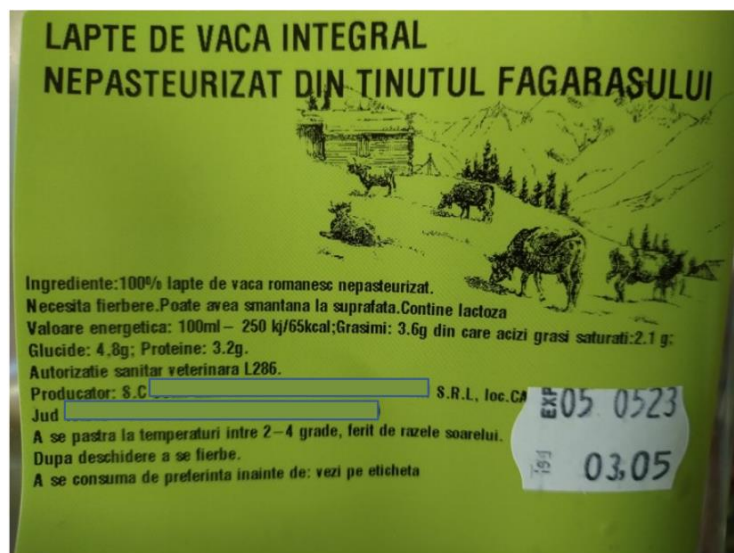


Fig. 2. Label on mountain milk packaging

A number of findings on the functioning of the supplier-restaurant network in Brasov show the following aspects. In certain situations *suppliers* have to generate a series of externalities for *restaurants* in the historic centre and in the area with the highest tourist traffic, the costs of which have to be assumed in the market price. Its narrow streets and time restrictions in terms of traffic make it very difficult for vehicles to access, which means that deliveries take longer. This

gives rise to the idea of improving the timing of activities and the value chain of supplier-restaurant cooperation.

3.3. Future research

The application of the aspects described in the framework research of this paper indicates some elements that need to be analyzed in view of the implementation and completion of the *European FOODCLIC Project* on the identification of sustainable interfaces between science, policy and practice, leading to the development of integrated urban food policies through the development of sustainability based on the CLIC concept (*Co-benefits, Spatial Linkages, Social Inclusion and Sectoral Connectivities*), in order to transform food systems in urban regions and adapt them to current conditions and requirements. For relevance, 25 organisations from 9 European countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Spain and Portugal) participate in the project. From Romania participate: Transilvania University of Brasov and the City Hall of Brasov, the project is ongoing [9].

Creating urban food environments that make healthy and sustainable food available, affordable and attractive to all citizens (including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups), requires solutions that address a number of important directions, including the following:

- Making improvements to facilitate food delivery in the historic centre, building nearby car parks, better regulating supply, and designing and implementing an integrated plan for tourist restaurants, which is currently lacking in the city.
- Establish through analysis and calculation the type of "supplier-restaurant" networks for Brasov: simple or branched, fluid or customised.
- Establishing the axis of the networks towards the historical centre, towards the tourist restaurants, or towards the neighbourhoods.
- Optimizing the typological structure of restaurants in Brasov by category: avant-garde cuisine, international cuisine, traditional cuisine, mountain cuisine, etc.
- Carrying out statistical analyses by neighbourhoods to show the percentage of use of local agri-food raw materials in local urban cuisine, including those from the mountain region concerned; the ratio of Romanian to imported raw materials; how many restaurants have a hyper-local food trend; optimized seasonal product staggering and frequency of menu changes, while maintaining quality throughout the year.

Conclusions

(1). The principles and observations analysed show that the optimised interrelationship induces effective collaboration between all those involved in the

local agri-food production and sales chain, cooperation which leads to a significant increase in the potential of small businesses in the catering sector and to territorial development.

(2). Efficient integration between suppliers and buyers is the key strategy for good management and improved financial performance of restaurants based on strengthening fair commercial transactions between suppliers and restaurants.

(3). Optimised supplier-restaurant relations are based on personal relationships and trust built up over time, based on ethics from production to marketing and the restaurant menu, which is to the advantage of agri-food suppliers whose offer is based on quality rather than price.

(4). Suppliers, through the raw materials and foodstuffs they offer, are also becoming key players in urban cuisine, playing a key role because they bring value to the tradition and quality of local products, and thanks to them restaurants can offer customers (including tourists) broader gastronomic experiences, effectively connecting the customer with the uniqueness of the local food heritage culture (e.g. the city of Brasov).

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