

DIVERSIFYING FARMERS' LIVELIHOODS THROUGH GASTRONOMY AND TOURISM ACTIVITIES TO INCREASE TECHNOLOGICAL, ECONOMIC, ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL RESILIENCE: CASE STUDY SIBIU COUNTY, ROMANIA

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Abstract. *Small farms need technological, economic and social consolidation to reduce their vulnerability to current and future challenges, to be efficient and sustainable. In this context, the paper aims to present examples of good practices, which in addition to agricultural activity, traditionally process the obtained raw material, carry out services in the field of public catering and receive visitors for educational purposes. These farms integrate technology into current activity, contribute to the dissemination of knowledge related to traditional agricultural practices and local gastronomy. At the same time, they play an essential role in the conservation of landscapes and biodiversity and support and ensure farmers.*

Keywords: diversification, resilience, traditional farming, local gastronomy, rural tourism, farm open to visitors

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1. Introduction

Rural tourism and local gastronomy in Romania have received increasing academic and practical attention, reflecting their importance for sustainable regional development and cultural heritage preservation [7, 20, 34]. The integration of traditional foods, culinary heritage, and local gastronomic experiences into rural tourism is seen as a vital strategy for differentiating rural destinations, fostering community-based development, and enhancing visitor

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satisfaction [11, 35]. Romania's diverse rural landscapes and rich culinary traditions have positioned the country as a promising destination for experiential tourism, especially as both domestic and international tourists seek authentic, off-the-beaten-path experiences [24, 30].

Diversification of farmers' livelihoods through gastronomy and tourism activities is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional strategy to enhance technological, economic, environmental, and social resilience in rural communities [6, 16, 38]. Economic gains, social cohesion, environmental adaptation, and technological innovation are tightly interlinked, producing a holistic model of rural transformation.

By integrating culinary innovation, agritourism, and sustainable tourism practices, farmers can create new income streams, preserve local culture, and foster community well-being [14, 25].

The aim of this study is to highlight the role of farm diversification in enhancing farm resilience and improving rural livelihoods through integration into rural tourism, agritourism, and gastronomic tourism, using Sibiu County as a case study.

Literature review

Farm Diversification

Farm diversification represents a key strategy for enhancing the resilience, sustainability, and competitiveness of agricultural holdings across Europe, including Romania, in the context of global market pressures, agricultural policies, and rural development requirements [9, 31]. Diversification may take various forms, including the development of agritourism, the introduction of non-agricultural activities, the adoption of agroecological production systems, and the integration of community-oriented services. These approaches constitute adaptive responses to market instability and changes in public policies [31].

In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Romania and Serbia, small-scale farms predominate and make a significant contribution to social cohesion and the maintenance of rural livelihoods. However, they remain particularly vulnerable to economic shocks and changes in agricultural policy frameworks [13]. Consequently, farm diversification has emerged as an important strategy for strengthening economic viability and long-term sustainability. Diversification can take multiple forms, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories and types of activities as forms of diversification of farm activity. Source: Adapted and synthesized by the authors based on the literature review

<i>Category of Activities</i>	<i>Examples of Activities</i>
Agricultural and Production Diversification	Niche crops: cultivation of medicinal and aromatic plants or mushrooms.
	Organic production: adoption of organic farming systems to produce healthier food products and obtain higher market prices.
	Integrated livestock production: livestock systems emphasizing animal welfare, biodiversity conservation, and the on-farm utilization of feed resources.
	Extended crop rotation: cultivation of three to four crops to comply with environmental requirements and agri-environmental schemes.
Processing and Value Addition	Primary processing: establishment of facilities for sorting and washing vegetables and fruits.
	Secondary processing: production of jams, natural juices, preserves, cheeses, and bakery products.
	Own-brand development: creation of a local brand for direct marketing to final consumers, thereby shortening the supply chain.
Agritourism and Recreational Services	Accommodation and catering: operation of agritourism guesthouses or local gastronomic points offering farm-based products.
	Recreational activities: organization of craft workshops, product tastings, horseback riding, and nature-based excursions.
	Educational farms: provision of educational programs for schools, camps, and guided visits for children.
Services and Complementary Activities	Mechanized services: provision of agricultural services (soil cultivation, harvesting, transportation) to other farms.
	Renewable energy production: installation of photovoltaic panels on farm buildings or establishment of biogas facilities using animal manure.
	Direct sales: operation of farm-gate shops or organization of “Pick-Your-Own” events, allowing consumers to harvest fruits directly from the farm.

Farm Resilience

At the European level, significant regional disparities can be observed in the structure and performance of farms, particularly regarding the specific vulnerabilities affecting Eastern and South-Eastern Europe [13]. At the same time,

the development of related sectors, such as agritourism, depends on the complex interaction between public policies and regional economic conditions [2].

Farm resilience has become a strategic objective for European agriculture, especially in the context of increasing economic, social, and environmental sustainability challenges, as well as structural differences among Member States, including Romania [26]. Agriculture continues to be a cornerstone of the Romanian rural economy, playing a crucial role in ensuring food security and supporting the sustainable development of rural areas [17].

The literature highlights the need for differentiated agricultural policies and the strengthening of the social and economic capital of Romanian farms in order to enhance their resilience to current and future challenges [13, 26]. At the same time, technological adaptation and modernization, the diversification of agricultural activities (such as agritourism), and the reduction of dependence on subsidies are recognized as key elements of sustainable rural development [2,17].

Economic resilience can be strengthened through the efficient management of natural capital, the adoption of diversification strategies, the assessment of real production costs, and the integration of green economy principles and digital technologies into farm management [18, 36]. Policies that promote innovation, technology transfer, and human capital development can generate positive effects on the competitiveness and sustainability of the agricultural sector [8].

Enhancing the economic resilience of farms represents a central objective for the agricultural sector, as it is essential for ensuring sustainability, adaptability, and competitiveness in the face of environmental, social, and market-related changes [18]. Economic resilience refers to the ability of farms to manage risks, adapt to crises, and maintain long-term profitability through innovative strategies and the efficient use of resources [8, 36].

Social Resilience: Community services provided by farms are becoming an increasingly important component of sustainable rural development, with a direct impact on social cohesion, economic diversification, and the revitalization of rural areas [15, 23]. Beyond agricultural production, these services may include social, educational, food-related, recreational, and innovation-oriented activities, often supported by social and solidarity economy models [15]. As a result, farms perform multifunctional roles that contribute significantly to reducing inequalities and enhancing community resilience [4].

Farm-based community services are essential for integrated rural development. They promote social inclusion, economic diversification, and local innovation [15, 23]. The active involvement of farms in the provision of social, educational, and food-related services, in partnership with public authorities and local communities, can help reduce territorial disparities and strengthen rural resilience [4, 5].

Environmental Resilience: Environmental resilience is another fundamental dimension of farm sustainability and refers to the capacity of agricultural systems to withstand, adapt to, and recover from environmental disturbances while maintaining their productive and ecological functions. Strengthening environmental resilience requires the sustainable management of natural resources, the conservation of biodiversity, the adoption of agroecological practices, and the reduction of environmental pressures associated with agricultural production.

Diversified farming systems are generally more resilient to climate-related risks, market fluctuations, and ecological disturbances than highly specialized systems. Practices such as crop diversification, extended crop rotations, integrated crop–livestock systems, organic farming, and the preservation of landscape features contribute to enhancing ecosystem services and reducing environmental vulnerability. Furthermore, the development of short supply chains and community-oriented services can strengthen the relationship between farms and local ecosystems, supporting both environmental sustainability and rural resilience in the long term.

Local gastronomy and rural tourism in Romania

The literature demonstrates that rural tourism and local gastronomy in Romania are interdependent forces driving sustainable development, cultural preservation, and economic growth in rural areas [10, 33, 37]. The sector's future success depends on strategic marketing, investment in infrastructure, stakeholder collaboration, and leveraging digital tools.

Integration of gastronomy with rural tourism supports local economies, reduces depopulation, and preserves intangible cultural heritage [24, 32].

Traditional Romanian food products are widely consumed and valued, contributing to the sustainability of rural areas and the development of a circular economy [27, 30].

Open Farms for Visitors

Open farms are agricultural holdings that welcome visitors and provide direct experiences related to farming activities, local traditions, and authentic gastronomy. These farms enable consumers to gain first-hand knowledge of how food is produced, serving as important educational, social, and economic bridges between urban and rural communities.

In Romania, this practice has expanded considerably since the early 2000s, alongside the diversification of rural activities and the development of the agritourism sector, particularly in areas with significant natural and cultural potential, such as mountainous regions and villages with well-preserved traditions. Open farms offer tourists the opportunity to participate in agricultural

activities, taste local products, attend craft workshops, and engage in gastronomic events. As a result, they contribute to the economic revitalization of rural communities, promote rural heritage, and support the preservation of local identity.

Digitalization and Technological Innovation in Rural Tourism in Romania

Digitalization and technological innovation play a crucial role in the transformation of rural tourism in Romania by facilitating the development of smart destinations, promoting cultural heritage, and enhancing local attractiveness and competitiveness [12,19]. The implementation of digital technologies—from mobile applications and online booking systems to virtual reality platforms and smart destination management tools—supports service diversification, the digitalization of the tourism experience, and the sustainable development of rural areas [3, 22].

Digitalization and technological innovation generate substantial benefits for Romanian rural tourism, ranging from the diversification of tourism products and the promotion of cultural and natural heritage to increased visitor satisfaction and the strengthening of local communities [12,19]. Furthermore, digital tools enable rural businesses to improve marketing effectiveness, expand market access, and establish direct communication with potential visitors.

The implementation of integrated digital strategies, investments in digital skills and education, and the rapid adoption of emerging technologies have the potential to transform Romanian villages into smart, competitive, and sustainable tourism destinations [1, 22]. In this context, digitalization represents not only a technological advancement but also a strategic instrument for enhancing the resilience, visibility, and long-term development of rural areas.

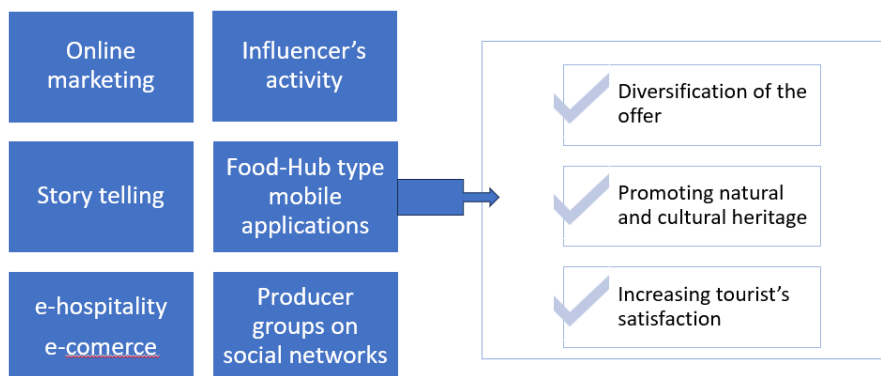


Fig. 1. Integrating digitalization and technological innovation into gastronomic and tourism initiatives in rural areas

Source: Adapted and synthesized by the authors based on the literature review.

2. Materials and Methods

In the first stage of the research, a comprehensive review of the scientific literature was conducted, focusing on agritourism, rural tourism, farm diversification, and farm resilience. To complement the theoretical framework, statistical data from official sources were analyzed, including the National Institute of Statistics [21], as well as data available at the local level through the Sibiu County Tourism Association [28]. The analysis considered indicators such as the number of tourist accommodation establishments, accommodation capacity, tourist flows, and the average length of stay.

The second stage of the study was based on field visits, direct observations, and discussions with the owners of guesthouses, local gastronomic points, and farms open to visitors. In addition, the social media pages of farms in Sibiu County that had diversified their agricultural activities through agritourism and local gastronomy were examined. This approach enabled the collection of qualitative information regarding diversification strategies, visitor engagement, marketing practices, and the contribution of these activities to farm resilience and rural development.

3. Results and Discussions

The results and discussions refer to a case study on diversification of farms activities through rural tourism, agritourism, local gastronomic points and opened farms in Sibiu County

3.1 Rural Tourism and Agritourism in Sibiu County

Sibiu County is among the most dynamic tourist destinations in Romania, owing to its remarkable cultural heritage, diverse natural landscape, and well-developed tourism infrastructure. Within this complex tourism profile, rural tourism and agritourism occupy an important position, contributing significantly to the economic development of rural communities and the valorization of local traditions.

The development of rural tourism in the county is further supported by the promotion of integrated thematic routes, such as the "*Cheese Route*", "*The Făgăraș Borderlands Route*", "*The Salt Route*", "*The Nature Route*", and "*The Fortifications Route*". These thematic circuits facilitate the coherent promotion of local heritage and encourage tourist mobility among different rural settlements. The Sibiu County Council also promotes outdoor activities and connections with local gastronomy through the "*Years of Hiking*" program, which offers weekly hiking routes guided by local experts and designed to showcase the county's natural and cultural attractions [28].

Currently, a total of 519 tourist accommodation establishments are officially classified in Sibiu County (see Figure 3a). Of these, 27% are agritourism guesthouses, while 14% are tourist guesthouses. Although the number of accommodation establishments increased from 428 units in 2021 to 519 units in 2025, the average length of stay declined from 1.7 days in 2021 to 1.58 days in 2025.

The spatial distribution of agritourism and tourist guesthouses highlights three distinct tourism areas within the county:

- Area 1 – Very high density, located in the region of *Mărginimea Sibiului*, particularly in the localities of Rășinari, Gura Râului, and Sibiul. Located in the mountainous area, the villages capitalize on the well-preserved natural and cultural potential, the pastoral tradition of the area and the specific gastronomy of Mărginimea Sibiului. The entrepreneurial spirit of the locals is noteworthy here.
- Area 2 – High density, situated in *Țara Oltului* and along the *Transfăgărășan Corridor*, including the localities of Cârțișoara, Porumbacu de Sus, and the touristic area of Valea Avrigului. Located at the foot of the Făgăraș Mountains, the villages capitalize on the beauty of the landscapes, the tradition of extensive ruminant farming, the fishing potential of the mountain waters, and local gastronomy.
- Area 3 – Moderate to dispersed density, located in the Târnava Plateau and the northern part of the county, including the villages of Moșna and Biertan. This area is characterized by tourism experiences focused on organic gastronomy and the valorization of cultural heritage, particularly the fortified churches.

These spatial patterns reflect the diversity of tourism resources within Sibiu County, ranging from mountain landscapes and traditional rural lifestyles to gastronomic experiences and heritage-based tourism. The principal tourism indicators for the period 2021–2025 are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Main Tourism Indicators for Sibiu County (2021–2025)

Tourism Indicator	Unit of Measurement	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Accommodation establishments	Number	428	421	418	484	519
Existing accommodation capacity	Places	12,574	12,164	11,675	12,731	13,300
Accommodation capacity in operation	Thousand place-days	3,287.4	3,540.9	3,523.8	3,556.1	4,007.4
Tourist arrivals	Thousands	454.9	523.9	578.2	579.6	628.8
Overnight stays	Thousands	776.2	903.6	948.5	936.1	985.9

Source: [21] (accessed on 25.05.2026)

The main ways of diversifying farm activities in Sibiu County through agritourism and gastronomy can be summarized as activities clustered around the concept of “*Farm-based gastronomy*” (see Figure 2).



Fig.2 Diversifying the activity of farms in Sibiu County through tourism and gastronomy
Source: Adapted and synthesized by the authors based on the literature review and their own observations

3.2 Local gastronomic points (LGPs)

LGPs, small family-run establishments serving traditional dishes from local ingredients, have proliferated in Romania, especially in mountain regions with established tourism infrastructure [7, 32, 33].

Gastronomy is central to Romania’s rural tourism value proposition, playing a key role in destination branding and the creation of memorable tourist experiences [10,11]. Digital storytelling and multimodal narratives on social media by LGPs have become essential strategies for communicating authenticity, local culture, and emotional connections [11].

LGPs enhance destination image, support local producers, and stimulate rural economies by attracting visitors seeking authentic culinary experiences [11, 33]. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the sector’s flexibility and resilience, but

also revealed local administrative deficiencies and a need for improved digital marketing and youth engagement [7,11].

The evolution of the number of LGPs in Sibiu County between 2019-2026 demonstrates farmers' interest in providing public food services and capitalizing on the agricultural raw materials they obtain (see Figure 3, b). It is noted that 57% of the total of 46 existing LGPs were established in the last two years [29]. They operate in 31 rural localities. The local gastronomic points have a maximum capacity of 15 seats, and the menus offered are based on their own production, seasonal ingredients, cooked according to recipes specific to the area.

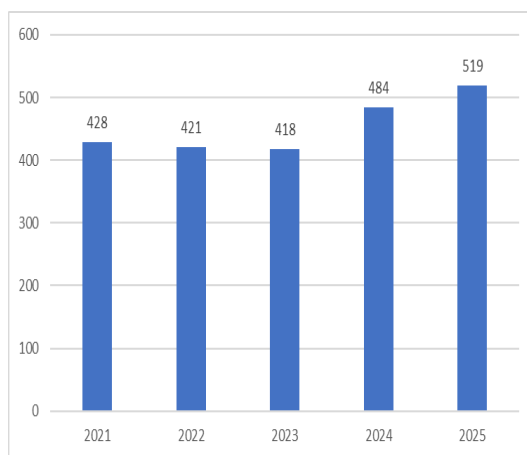


Fig. 3.a

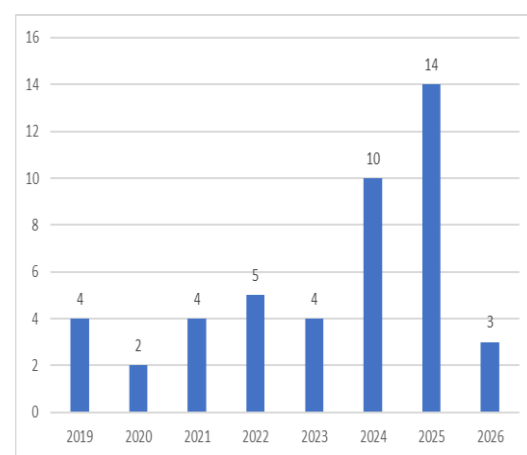


Fig. 3.b

a. Units of accommodation in Sibiu County (2021-2025)

b. Number of the number of LGPs in Sibiu County (2019-2026)

Source: processed by authors based on [21, 29].

They contribute to: preserving and valorising local products and traditional gastronomy; supporting local agriculture and maintaining an authentic lifestyle; promoting the cultural heritage of rural communities.

Two examples of successful gastronomic points are: "*Om bun din Alămor*" and "*Cămara Chivuței*" in the village of Sadu. The activity of the first LGP is approx. 6 years old and is based on the host's passion for making homemade bread in a traditional oven. This is sold weekly at the "Transilvania" peasant market in Sibiu. The farm raises animals, grows vegetables and produces fruit. The farm has two accommodation rooms and organizes cart or sleigh rides in the surroundings of the town. The promotion of the activity is carried out through social media pages, with over 900 followers. The second LGP is approx. 7 years old and is based on the host's passion for cooking. The farm grows vegetables, raises animals and processes canned vegetables and fruits. The activity is promoted through the social media page, which has over 4.7 thousand followers.

3.3 Open Farms for Visitors

The primary role of farms open to visitors is to provide education and facilitate reconnection with nature, while promoting transparency in agricultural activities and their social impact, supporting household income, and fostering engagement in tourism-related activities.

Farms open to visitors have multiple roles for the local community and visitors.

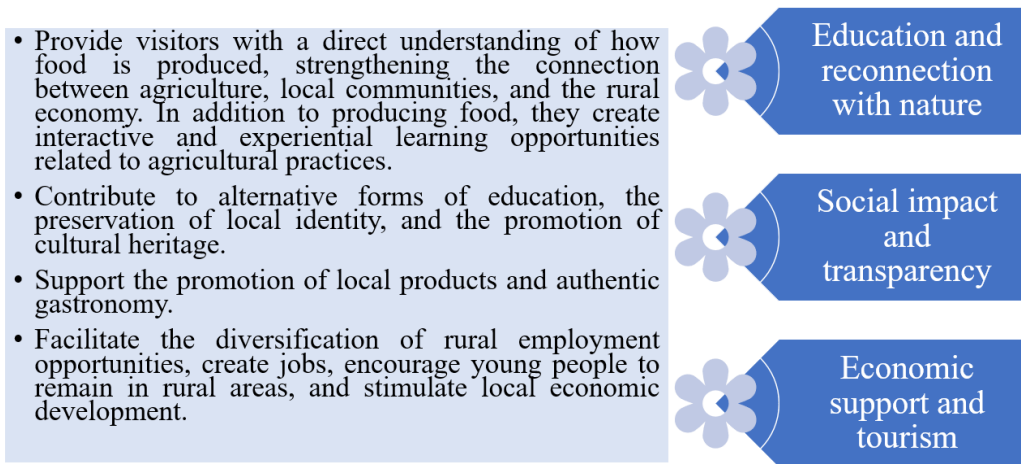


Fig. 4 The role of farms open to visitors

Source: own's design.

Examples of Open Farms in Sibiu County:

“Bio Moșna” Farm, Moșna

“Bio Moșna,” located in the village of Moșna, has more than 25 years of experience and operates as an organic farm based on a philosophy of complete transparency. The family raises dairy cattle and processes the raw milk into a variety of artisanal cheeses using recipes and techniques acquired in Switzerland. Visitors are invited to explore the vegetable garden and observe the production process, while also participating in traditional brunches featuring handcrafted cheeses and organic food products. The family has further diversified its activities through the development of tourism services, the establishment of a Local Gastronomic Point (LGP), and the rental of two guest rooms. Its social media presence has attracted more than 10,000 followers.

“Grădina cu de toate” Farm, Veseud

“Grădina cu de toate” (“The Garden of Everything”), located in the village of Veseud, has been operating since 2019 and focuses on the cultivation of fruits and vegetables, which are subsequently processed in a small artisanal workshop.

Visitors can participate in guided tours of the family's gardens, receive information on the benefits of consuming fresh produce, and take part in product tastings. The farm's products are marketed directly on-site, through retail outlets in the cities of Sibiu and Braşov, and via online orders. Since 2024, the family has also established a Local Gastronomic Point (LGP). The farm maintains an active presence on social media, where it has attracted more than 2,500 followers.

Conclusions

- (1) The diversification of farmers' livelihoods through gastronomy and rural tourism activities represents a rural development strategy that capitalizes on local resources to generate additional income, reduce dependence on traditional agriculture, and enhance the resilience of rural communities to technological, economic, environmental, and social changes. This diversification encompasses the development of rural tourism and agritourism, the promotion of local gastronomic products, the organization of food fairs and culinary events, and the involvement of women and other vulnerable groups in new economic activities.
- (2) The diversification of farm activities through agritourism and local gastronomy constitutes a strategy for directly improving farmers' quality of life, transforming farm households characterized by intensive physical labor and seasonal incomes into stable, multifunctional, and community-oriented enterprises.
- (3) The main benefits of farm diversification include strengthening the economic position of farms, preserving and valorizing natural and cultural heritage, creating employment opportunities, reinforcing social cohesion in rural areas, safeguarding traditions and transmitting them to future generations, improving local infrastructure, and enhancing the attractiveness of rural areas through investment and tourism development.
- (4) The environmental resilience of farms can be strengthened through the development of community-oriented services and short supply chains. Social resilience is enhanced through the active involvement of farms in the provision of social, educational, and food-related services in partnership with local authorities and communities. Economic resilience can be reinforced through the efficient management of natural capital, the adoption of diversification strategies, the assessment of real production costs, and the integration of green economy principles and digital tools.
- (5) The literature demonstrates that rural tourism and local gastronomy in Romania are interdependent drivers of sustainable development, cultural preservation, and economic growth in rural areas. This is also evidenced in the case of farm diversification in Sibiu County, where more than 200

accommodation establishments are classified in rural areas and 46 local gastronomic points have been established.

(6) Farmers are custodians of national culture. *Oral traditions and folklore*: agricultural communities are often the source of proverbs, folk songs, seasonal rituals, and local knowledge. These cultural assets are transmitted from one generation to the next alongside agricultural practices and skills. *Connection to the land*: national identity is deeply rooted in the landscape. Through their stewardship of the land, farmers preserve the historical and geographical character of a country. *Culinary heritage*: farmers play a fundamental role in conserving regional food systems, local breeds and crop varieties, traditional food cultures, and customary cooking methods. These elements constitute the foundation of a nation's gastronomy and food identity. *Social cohesion*: rural communities foster strong networks of mutual support, community festivals, and shared values, thereby contributing to social solidarity and cultural continuity.

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