City, Tourism, and Food. The Italian Street Food Experience as a Connecting Resource and Local Identity

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Abstract. The current competitive environment, dominated by complexity and dynamism, sees territories and, cities, competing to attract capital, residents, businesses, and tourists. This competition is developed through strategies and policies aimed at highlighting local peculiarities to become more attractive. In an era marked by globalization, there is a growing appreciation of local identities and productive traditions. These elements are considered distinctive, as they shape and enrich the tourism offerings of different places. Food, understood as a social and cultural phenomenon, takes on an important evocative role of the territory of origin. In countries such as Italy, associated in the collective imagination not only with art and culture but also with good and healthy food, where the wine and gastronomic offer is extremely varied and widespread, food becomes a strong element of tourist appeal. Food and wine tourism, which is growing steadily according to UNWTO data, attracts postmodern, slow, and green tourists who are interested in local specialties and want to connect with the local area. Hence one aspect of particular interest is street food, a global phenomenon that involves about 2.5 billion people every day. In Italy, this ancient gastronomic practice finds great acceptation, especially in cities, and becomes an experience through which tourists interact with terroir values. In an innovative context, where personalization and sustainability are drivers for the development and growth of the restaurant industry, street food, if made with local and sustainable ingredients, could help strengthen the competitiveness of the urban-rural system and create 'new' itineraries for responsible tourists.

Keywords: Food tourism · Street Food · Slow tourism · City · Italy

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1 Introduction

In an era characterized by strong globalizing forces, the rediscovery and valorization of local identities and productive traditions play a fundamental role. These elements are not only perceived as essential in shaping and enhancing the range of various tourist-territorial products, but also as distinctive features deeply rooted in the regions, capable of generating added value (economic, social, cultural, and political).

One of the consequences of this appreciation in the political arena is the formulation and execution of policies that encourage and enhance, or even delineate, local identities and distinctive elements [1].

That's why socioeconomic development policies implemented at different levels strive to accentuate the unique factors that propel destinations forward, often attributing much of their distinctiveness to symbols of environmental and cultural heritage, local knowledge, vocational skills, and excellent cuisine. In many instances, this culinary tradition takes on the guise of a genuine "gastronomic heritage".

For this reason, numerous countries adopt a gastronomic policy with the aim of positioning the nation as a culinary and gastronomic leader, supported by a range of inputs including traditional foods and cultural elements, which must align with market demands.

This is because food, being seen as a social and cultural phenomenon, carries with it an evocative essence of its place of origin, particularly when the qualities and benefits of the supply chain are emphasized. Moreover, when food is distinctive, deeply rooted in the local culture, and associated with healthy values, it can serve as a powerful draw for tourism. According to the World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism), the different segments of food and wine tourism are growing steadily. Even when food isn't the primary reason for travel, specific food-related experiences are increasingly sought after, particularly by tourists described as postmodern, slow, and green, who are keen on engaging with the local area and its various stakeholders. In this context, a particularly noteworthy mode of food consumption is street food, a phenomenon that engages 2.5 billion people worldwide daily. Italy, especially its cities where it originated and continues to evolve, demonstrates significant acceptance of this trend [2].

The tradition of street food has a rich history and is now seen as both a trend and an authentic gastronomic experience through which tourists engage with the local area. The individuals who prepare and sell street food, mostly locals, serve as ambassadors for the region's resources. They don't just sell a meal; they also share the story behind it. Despite its transient nature, conveying these stories is a challenging task due to the values they embody. In an innovative setting, where customization and sustainability are catalysts for the advancement and expansion of the restaurant industry, street food crafted with locally sourced ingredients from nearby agricultural regions or urban gardens could enhance the competitiveness of the urban-rural system. This could lead to positive outcomes benefiting both urban centers and rural areas, turning them into 'new' destinations for conscientious tourists.

Hence, this paper seeks to undertake a literature review concerning the definition and progression of street food, with the intention of analyzing its role within the Italian urban context as a fundamental component for comprehensive socio-economic development of the territory. Apart from the Introduction, the article comprises four subsequent

sections: 2. Related Works, 3. Objectives, Materials and Method, 4. Street Food in Italy: Perspectives for Integrated Development, and 5. Conclusions.

2 Related works

Drawing a clear distinction between activities inherently associated with Street Food and those that are not is, in some cases, a complex task. Street Food doesn't just concern how food is consumed - typically on the street - but also its production and distribution.

Regarding the preparation and sale of street food, the FAO clarified any uncertainties in 1995 [3] by noting that "The food might be cooked at home and distributed or alternately prepared on the spot depending upon the space available. There are fixed stalls, a variety of types of push-carts, roadside stands, hawkers with head-loads, and other arrangements depending upon the ingenuity of the individual, resources available, the type of food sold, and the availability of other facilities either acquired officially or appropriated from the city".

Thus, Street Food activities include those practiced in traditional stands and carts as well as those that take place with food trucks. These latter types have spread mainly in America, following the economic crisis of 2007 that led many vendors to close their fixed locations in favor of itinerant, less tax-intensive modes of sale.

Indeed, one of the distinctions among various countries lies in the formalization and oversight of street vending. For instance, in many cases across the Latin American region, vending food on the streets is not regulated or formalized to the extent that it involves tax obligations.

Although street food has gained considerable traction recently, particularly in Western countries where it has become a trend, the practice of eating food on the street dates back to ancient Roman times. Evidence of this can be found in the *tabernae* and *cauponae* of Pompeii, establishments overlooking the streets where patrons of that era were accustomed to consuming food, often while standing [4]. This mode of consumption has endured through the centuries, as evidenced by various artworks created between the Middle Ages and the modern era. These artworks attest to the widespread practice of street food consumption, even among the wealthier classes, who engaged in it to avoid visiting taverns [5].

Street food evolves over time and across different geographical locations, adapting to new contexts such as industrialized and globalized settings, which inevitably bring about significant changes in lifestyles and the sourcing and consumption of food. Consequently, it is a dynamic phenomenon that finds its niche within urban systems, with a portion of their tourist appeal linked to this form of food consumption [2]. For instance, in certain major cities across Latin America, Africa, and Asia, street food represents a tradition and often the primary means of accessing food for lower-income groups. Furthermore, it's important to recognize that in these countries, challenges extend beyond food consumption and include difficulties accessing education services and water resources. The absence of clean water and proper education, in some instances, makes it impractical to prepare food under optimal conditions. As a result, some tourists may choose to avoid street food when visiting these countries. Nevertheless, in response to these challenges in Latin America, it's estimated that there could be as many as three million such

businesses, although precise data is unavailable due to the absence of defined licensing regulations for such enterprises [6].

In other Countries, like the United States, street food is viewed as a flexible business tool, whereas in many European and South-East Asian cities, it's seen more as a trend. Food, being the core element of street food, holds strategic importance concerning the competitiveness of territorial systems. It intertwines across various dimensions crucial for evaluating the progress of territories in achieving specific development objectives. Considering, for instance, some of the Sustainable Development Goals outlined in the 2030 Agenda, it's believed that ethically and responsibly conducted street food activities, with a focus on the supply chain, can contribute to tackling poverty and hunger, promoting health, well-being, dignified employment, economic growth, and combating climate change.

Hence, the food challenge is a genuine one that demands the commitment of urban-rural territorial systems and must prioritize the promotion of smart and sustainable production, consumption, and post-consumption practices. In cities, where food supply and consumption methods differ, it's beneficial to analyze the role played by street food activities, which often enrich the tourist offerings and enhance the consumption experience, contrasting the antithetical model represented by fast food chains.

3 Objectives, Materials and Method

In this research, the central objective was to carry out a review of the literature on the definition and evolution of Street Food in order to analyze this practice in the Italian urban context as a key element for an integrated socio economic development of the territory. The research began with a global overview of street food practices and their urban connections, before narrowing its focus to the Italian context. Here, emphasis was placed on the ability of urban systems to establish experiential street food circuits, thereby integrating with rural areas.

To achieve the study's objectives, qualitative methodology was employed. This research paradigm enables not only the examination of qualitative qualities or entities, but also the analysis of the context in which they occur [7]. Within this qualitative approach, analyzing the context is feasible through a range of techniques or methods such as interviews, life stories, case studies, or documentary analysis. Researchers can blend their observations with those provided by others [8]. Thus, for this study, it was considered preferable to understand street food within the urban context and explore how its positive impacts might extend to the rural context through the promotion of local products (Fig. 1).

3.1 The Urban Dimension of Street Food: Between Definition and Localization

More than thirty years since the FAO's official definition of Street Food, it remains intriguing to see how the phenomenon has maintained a strong connection with the urban environment that fostered its emergence and facilitated its development over time. Street Food remains closely associated with cities, particularly thriving in the most urbanized regions, including metropolises and megacities, where it manifests in various

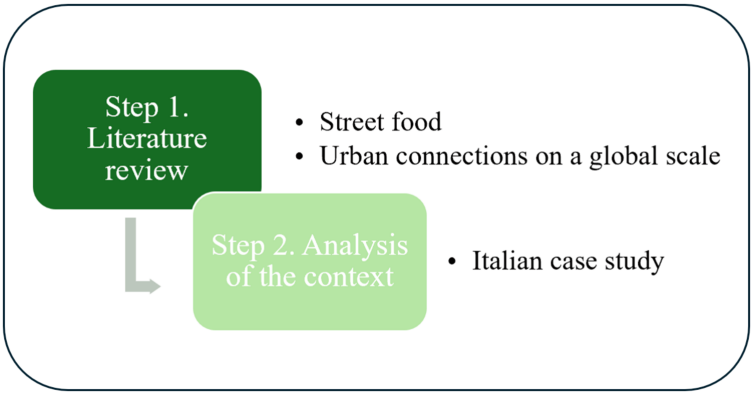

Fig. 1. Methodological process. Source: Own elaboration

forms: serving as a basic means of sustenance, enhancing the diversity of tourist and culinary experiences, and providing a more or less sustainable alternative to other dining options.

Street Food is given by that set of activities that "… are ready-to-eat foods and beverages prepared and/or sold by vendors and hawkers especially in streets and other similar public places" [9]. The FAO's widely acknowledged definition places particular emphasis on street vendors, associating them with specific locations such as streets or other public spaces like squares and markets where food is both sold and consumed, as well as with the processes involved in food preparation and sale [10–12]. This connection is not incidental, considering that historically, squares have been pivotal locations for commercial activities. These spaces were vibrant hubs, animated by the presence of vendors and frequented by urban dwellers and nearby rural residents who gathered there to purchase various goods and foods. Examples such as the Agorà of ancient Greece, the souqs of Islamic cities, Persian and Indian Bazaars, and the Roman Forums illustrate how these marketplaces served not only as places of trade but also as spaces that fostered the development of social interactions [13].

As socio-economic development conditions have shifted, driven by processes of industrialization and extensive urbanization accompanied by significant population growth, particularly evident in the twentieth century, cities have undergone numerous transformations affecting their size, structure, and functions [14–16].

One of the most significant phenomena contributing to recent urban changes is globalization, alongside technological advancements and transportation revolutions. Consequently, the perception and experience of urban space by residents, visitors, tourists, and other city users have evolved. Urban space is now viewed not merely as physical but also as a realm of flows and social interactions [17, 18]. Consequently, perceptions of the city, its functions, uses, and even its culinary spaces have changed, especially those related to consumption, which are often the most visible aspects.

Indeed, deep relationships have always existed between urban space and food, such that some authors point out that "urban evolution is influenced not only by whatever taste demands but also by the behaviors, expectations, and actions that descend from

this demand… and the growing demand for relational spaces, places to sit down to eat, terraces, and dehors is changing public spaces" [19, pp. 109–110]. Fast food chains have proliferated across the globe, embodying a standardized model of production and consumption. However, there has been a resurgence of interest in local cuisine, accompanied by a renewed emphasis on the food production and marketing process [20, 21]. Concepts such as quality, traceability of products, locally sourced ingredients, and sustainability of production cycles have gained traction, driven by increasingly conscientious consumers. These trends have had a direct impact on traditional modes of food distribution in urban areas, including those of street food [22, 23].

However, it's evident that street food activities manifest differently across various cities. They take on specific forms influenced by the geographical, historical, economic, cultural, or religious attributes of their respective locations, which in turn shape how street food caters to diverse needs. Regarding the positioning of street food activities, there is a notable emphasis on their presence in city centers and, increasingly, in revitalized neighborhoods and suburbs. In this context, as demonstrated by some urban regeneration initiatives, street food plays a significant role in the revitalization and renewal policies of areas known as "Food Deserts," particularly prevalent in many American cities [24–26].

3.2 City, Tourism, and Food

Cities, throughout the world, exercise many functions (trade, industry, government, education, health, justice, etc.) to meet the needs of various actors, internal and external to the urban system, sometimes configuring themselves as specialized cities or as multifunctional cities [13].

Cities compete to attract resources, capital and businesses and do so by implementing useful strategies to foster their optimal positioning in markets of interest [27, 28]. The competition that is established between cities and territories pushes each reality to want to be the leader in terms of improving the living and settlement conditions by highlighting peculiarities [29, 30].

Among the issues for which cities compete, tourism holds a prominent position being a growing phenomenon worldwide. According to statistics highlighted by the UNWTO, international tourists in 2022 were 965 million and 62 percent chose to travel to Europe, followed by the Americas and Asia-Pacific. Within this scenario, Italy ranks fifth among the most visited countries in the world with 61.6 million international arrivals preceded in order by France (89.4 million arrivals), Spain (82.8), the U.S. (79.7) and China (62.9). An examination of data on the distribution of tourist arrivals in Italy shows that among the most popular locations are the art cities of the Center-North (Rome, Milan, Venice, Florence, and Turin) confirming the important weight of urban tourism [31].

Urban tourism today must come to terms with the changing tastes of consumers/tourists who elect the city as the destination for their 'slow walk' holiday to enjoy the authenticity of the visited places [32, 33].

Tourists/travelers decide on their travel destination either based on the natural attractions or climate of a location, but also and especially because they are attracted by the local food they can taste [34–37]. For this reason, food is considered a social fact and a cultural element [38]: it is configured as a real reminder of 'geographical eating' [39]

which at the same time allows individuals to live an 'educational' experience by retracing the history and identity of a territory [40, 41]. These assertions are also supported by the study carried out by the World Food Travel Association (WFTA) called 'Food Travel Monitor' [42] which identifies a percentage of around 90% of individuals who choose their travel destination not on the basis of place, but on the basis of food, wines and craft beers and because want find satisfaction from the interaction existing between space, events and native people [43, 44].

4 Street Food in Italy. Perspectives for an Integrated Development

Food consumption is an essential part of any vacation experience. Among the ways that allow tourists to save time, contain spending and at the same time enjoy local specialties produced with zero-kilometer ingredients and in respect of local production traditions, Street Food could be an effective solution. This is true if we refer to the so-called 'traditional Street Food' practices where the focus shifts from the logic of consumption to that of preparation. As Carlo Petrini, founder of the Italian slow food association, observes, 'traditional Street Food' is the demonstration that the slowness and slow values of a food do not lie in the way it is enjoyed but rather in the ingredients, in the link with tradition, in the stories about its diffusion and creation, in the people who prepare it and in the conviviality that develops where it is sold and consumed' [45].

It is also possible to find this concept in the decalogue drawn up by the National Street Food Association, according to which, with ethical and responsible characteristics, it should 1) Respect history and traditions; 2) Use typical and traditional ingredients; 3) Adopt ethics in carrying out the profession and respecting handed-down knowledge and know-how; 4) Respect the link with the territory to which the Street Food belongs; 5) Use artisanal tools; 6) Respect hygiene regulations; 7) Make genuine combinations; 8) Respect the environment both during the process of production, administration and consumption and in the management of premises; 9) Promote the territory (of origin); 10) Promote a Street Food network.

Therefore, Street Food is recognized as having a precise value in terms of tourism, and in the specific Italian case, talking about Street Food means firstly referring to a broad type of activity that falls under the heading of retail trade practiced outside fixed establishments.

It is known that the crisis following the Covid-19 pandemic has affected several product sectors that have suffered a significant decline in recent years. According to the data produced by the Observatory of the Ministry of Economic Development, "retail trade outside fixed establishments has been registering in recent years not only a hold, compared to that in shops, but a real growth trend in almost all its forms (with the exception of mail-order trade progressively replaced by internet trade). As of 2021, the National Institute of Statistics counts 1,791 local units involved in street food services with a total number of employees of 3,528.63 (annual average value) [46]. In particular, Lombardy has a significant presence of itinerant food services (228 local units) followed by Sicily (189), Apulia (184), Veneto (159), and Emilia Romagna (153) (Table 1).

In the last two years, Street Food activities have grown by about 13%, also favoured by the multiplication of festivals and food promotion initiatives in tourist destinations.

Table 1. Local units and employees in street food service by region in 2021

Region	Number of local units of active enterprises	Number of employees of local units of active enterprises (annual average value)
Abruzzo	63	98.3
Basilicata	18	25.53
Calabria	34	47.62
Campania	138	232.7
Emilia Romagna	153	357.23
Friuli Venezia Giulia	23	46.35
Latium	145	346.31
Liguria	20	47.09
Lombardy	228	434.88
Marches	44	79.44
Molise	10	13.61
Piedmont	123	215
Apulia	184	319.42
Sardinia	71	137.45
Sicily	189	311.94
Tuscany	128	301.46
Trentino Alto Adige	39	63
Umbria	16	34.53
Aosta Valley	6	5.94
Veneto	159	410.83
ITALIA	**1,791**	**3,528.63**

Data from the study carried out by Deloitte called 'Foodservice Market Monitor' (2023) [47] also confirm that in Italy in 2022, of the 75 billion relating to the food service market about 1% concerns the Street Food segment: 7 out of 10 Italians on holiday choose street food to taste typical recipes, in particular 83% look for traditional food from the territories visited, 13% ethnic food and 5% fast-food [48].

However, the increase in Street Food activities in the different Italian regions is countered by a 'standardization' of the offer: especially in the historical centers there is little diversification of local gastronomic offerings (the sandwich with *lampredotto* in Florence, *pani ca' meusa* in Palermo, *cicheti* in Venice, *arrosticini* from Abruzzo etc.) which gives way to the sale of 'globalized' food (Kebab, falafel, hot-dog, sushi etc.). In the long run, this trend could lead to a loss of competitiveness of the food supply for the urban tourism system and a loss of attraction for 'glocal' tourists interested in eating typical Street Food.

In Italy, the basket of agro-food goods spread across the twenty regions is varied and ranks first at the European level for the highest number of certified Denomination of Origin and Geographical Indication products: 890 products of which 326 are food and 526 wine (PDO, PGI, TSG), and 35 Spirit GI beverages [49]. The sale of these specialties as street food represent 'gastronomic deposits' [50] capable of conveying the values of a destination beyond urban borders.

In 2016, with a view to defining a quality itinerant gastronomic offer, the Qualivita Foundation (a non-profit organization founded in 2000 to valorize the agri-food sector) drew up a 'Manifesto of Italian Street Food' [22] in which the concepts of territoriality, accessibility, socialization, handicrafts, tradition, innovation and cheapness are strongly connected to motivate a sense of place and tourist diversification. In order to support these new cultural routes of taste in 2018, 'agricultural street food' was defined at the legislative level as one of the ways of direct sale of farm produce. Hence the creation of a network of Italian street food promoted by Coldiretti that, by stopping in squares and markets or as itinerant tours, allows fresh, certified and zero km products to be served. The sale takes place thanks to the use of modern Food Trucks, with all the equipment and comforts of traditional cuisine, which represent essential and innovative elements for the success of the urban-rural connection. This represents an important signal to give a specific type of Street Food that could contribute to strengthening the gastronomic offer of cities consolidated as destinations for tourists who, more and more frequently, love to admire the heritage while tasting local products purchased at low cost. In addition to this, there are the many initiatives promoted at municipal level, such as the Municipality of Milan, which since 2018 has been issuing five-year authorizations (renewed in 2022) for the itinerant street vending of food and beverages to be practiced on ecological vehicles in the city center, or the International Street Food event which, for its eighth edition, will stop in 150 Italian locations from March to November 2024, involving around 30 food trucks and offering not only local food, but also international specialties. These could be some different and alternative solutions capable of conveying conscious behavior, getting more in touch with vendors who become in a certain sense ambassador of the territory.

5 Conclusions

As has been demonstrated in this research, the practice of Street Food has a long history and is currently a trend and a true gastronomic experience through which tourists interact with the territory.

However, only if this Street Food offer is prepared by local inhabitants and made with local and sustainable ingredients, can it be a great economic asset that affects the competitiveness of the urban-rural system by creating "new" itineraries for responsible or green tourists. Therefore, it is essential that the public policies of the States are designed in favor of the offer of Street Food and not transnational franchises that standardize consumption models.

In Italy, Street Food can represent a competitive element in tourism, especially in cities. Indeed, it allows tourists the opportunity to taste local foods often prepared in a traditional way.

Street Food stalls and dedicated spaces can become real tourist attractions where it's possible to interact with local vendors who become ambassadors of the territory. Through the sale of regional and local specialties via Street Food, interest in the culture and history of a specific city can be increased. In this case, the role played by the organization of events and festivals where street food becomes an integral part could also be very important.

Finally, Street Food conducted sustainably and attentive to the specificities of the territories, in addition to contributing to the local economy and job market, is able to strengthen the bond between city and countryside with positive impacts on the entire supply chain.

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