

FROM FARM TO CONSUMER: ENHANCING THE VALUE OF AGRI-FOOD PRODUCTS FROM MOUNTAIN COUNTRY FARMS THROUGH LOCAL GASTRONOMIC POINTS

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Abstract

The European strategy "From Farm to Consumer", one of the key initiatives of the "Green Pact for Europe" is a new approach to the way consumers increasingly appreciate local food and direct sales. The Local Gastronomic Point (LGP) is a new approach that is developing in Romania, which meets these requirements, contributing to the creation and maintenance of jobs, to the sustainable development of rural communities and farms, being also the shortest sales chain, between producer and consumer. The Local Gastronomic Point is a concept that responds to the growing requirements in Romania, regarding the establishment of family catering units (farms), located in rural areas, that offer products and "cooking" specific to different geographical areas of Romania, following the rules and conditions of hygiene and food safety. Due to the LGP, farmers can enhance the value of their agri-food products, developing the complementary economic activity of serving local food/products, even "mountain products" and tourists/consumers can consume natural, traditional, specific and quality products from a particular region. This family-type activity is transferable to other mountain areas, to other rural localities, which may or may not have tourist potential. It can contribute to the development of rural tourism or to the creation of routes dedicated to gastronomic tourism.

Key words: mountain area, agri-food product, Local Gastronomic Points, Short food chain

Rural tourism represents a factor of cohesion and reduction of gaps between urban and rural areas. Great developments were made in this regard, being given the fact that in the rural area there are the premises of a quality tourism, the visitors of these places benefiting from the desired comfort. More and more people are heading to the countryside to spend their holidays there, looking for peace, fresh air, relaxation and entertainment, authentic experiences but also traditional, healthy food, specific to the visited place.

Along with agritourism, a gastronomic tourism tends to take shape, but less organized and promoted for the moment. However, there are sufficient resources, so that in the very near future a network of gastronomic tourism can be formed in the rural localities from the mountainous rural area and even more.

By rediscovering the dishes from the countryside, the place for serving the meal in the rural household became a place of socialization and authenticity transmitted through food. This type of healthy, slow-cooked food, accompanied by the whole miracle of the authentic rural place

where it is served, must be brought back to the table of consumers who visit the villages of Romania and can become the basis for developing a strategy for national gastronomic tourism.

Moreover, in this context, the existence of some places to serve meals in the rural area is also an important element in the transition to a healthier and more sustainable food system, by creating short food chains, from the perspective of opening the market opportunity for farmers, by promoting and selling agricultural products close to the source of production, in compliance with the objectives of the European strategy "From farm to consumer".

The need to develop places to serve meals, which highlight the local gastronomic heritage and offer food specific to the geographical area from where they belong, as well as the demand for real, safe and original culinary experiences in the countryside, led to the foundation of Local Gastronomic Points (LGP).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The undertaken research concerned presenting the existing legal framework, clarifying

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the terms that define the new family-type meal service structures: Local Gastronomic Points (LGP), their identification and the specific activities that the LGPs can carry out.

The main normative acts, which regulate the activity of Local Gastronomic Points, were identified and analyzed. The evolution of their foundation was followed, starting with 2018 when this new concept appeared, and until the end of September 2022.

As research methods, was used the study of the following documents: laws, government decisions, ministerial orders, orders of the president of the National Veterinary Sanitary and for Food Safety Authority, course guides and materials, as well as observation or content analysis. Data were collected and interpreted. These come from official public sources: Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Directorates from the county, the National Agency of the Mountain Area. Also, direct observation was used, studying two of these structures on site in order to observe on the spot the organization and promotion manner. Collecting, synthesizing and processing data from different sources was pursued.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The development of the regulatory framework for the operation of Local Gastronomic Points was started by the Ivan Patzaichin – Mila 23 Association in 2016 and benefited from the support of the National Sanitary Veterinary and for Food Safety Authority (NSVFSA) and of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. The approach, which was based on a public consultation process, aimed to simplify the way in which rural households can carry out economic activities that are not only profitable, but also contribute to strengthen the identity profile of the given area.

This new type of food unit was regulated by Order no. 106/2019 for the modification and completion of the Veterinary Sanitary and Food Safety Norm regarding the veterinary sanitary registration procedure and for food safety, the activities of obtaining and direct sale and/or retail of food products of animal or non-animal origin, as well as activities of production, processing, storage, transport and marketing of food products of non-animal origin, approved by the Order of the President of the National Veterinary Sanitary and Food Safety Authority no. 111/2008.

According to Annex 1, chapter II, letter m) from the Order of the President of NSVFSA no. 111/2008, with subsequent amendments and additions, "Local gastronomic points are units represented by private kitchens within the premises of rural homes, where are prepared and served

culinary products, according to recipes specific to the area, directly to the final consumer, for a maximum number of 12 people; the culinary products must be prepared from raw materials predominantly coming from primary production at the level of own farming, as well as from local producers or from authorized/registered sanitary-veterinary and food safety units".

According to the Good Practices Guide for Hygiene and Culinary Production developed by the Mila 23 Association and published on the website of the National Veterinary and Food Safety Authority, Local Gastronomic Points can be located and can carry out their activity within holdings, agricultural farms, stables, farms, fish farms, fish shelters, fish collection centers, hunting grounds, game collection centers, where one or more activities related to primary production are carried out: milk production, egg production, honey production, poultry/rabbit breeding, slaughtering of birds/rabbits in the own household, hunting of small game with feathers and fur (pheasants, partridges, ducks, geese, rabbits), fishing, tank farming, as well as growing vegetables and fruits.

Local Gastronomic Points, as family-type public food establishments, have as specific elements the following:

- they can function in permanent/seasonal rural households, agricultural farms, fish farms, stables, vineyards/fruit farms, wineries, hunting grounds;
- owners and family members can prepare and serve food products directly to final consumers (no more than 12 people served at the same time) in their own household;
- food products can be obtained from primary production at the level of own holding/farm, but also from other local producers;
- the raw materials from which the food is prepared must come only from authorized/registered sanitary-veterinary and food safety units;
- regarding the measure of primary products and other raw materials/food, they must come predominantly from the own household or from local producers.
- they can only have a maximum number of prepared foods in the daily menu, namely 2 appetizers (snacks/warm or cold entree), 2 first course (soups, borschts etc.), 2 second course (main course) and 2 desserts.

Within the Local Gastronomic Points, regardless of the origin of the food – own household or other local producers, certain rules of hygiene and food safety must be respected regarding the origin and preparation of the food, according to the legal norms in force.

Following the collaboration between the National Agency of the Mountain Area, the National Office of the Trade Register (NOTR), the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (NISES), the Ministry of Finance (MF), the National Agency for Fiscal Administration

(NAFA), the regulatory framework of the Local Gastronomic Points was completed by the addition made by the NISES of the economic activity carried out in the Local Gastronomic Point under CAEN code 5610-Restaurants.

Table 1

Evolution of the number of Local Gastronomic Points between 2018 - 2022

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	TOTAL	%
Nr. LGP at national level	6	43	57	81	43	230	100%
Nr. LGP situated in the mountain area – 658 localities (DMA)	4	24	35	59	21	143	62.17%
Nr. LGP situated in the mountain area - 948 localities (EMA)	4	26	38	68	33	169	73.47%

It should also be mentioned the acceptance by NOTR of the certificate issued to the participants for the professional training courses organized by NAMA, intended for people who want to open a Local Gastronomic Point, as a document that can be used in the registration process at NOTR, as an authorized person, individual enterprise or, if applicable, family enterprise, according to the stipulations of the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 44/2008 regarding the conduct of economic activities by authorized persons, individual businesses and family businesses, with subsequent amendments and additions, approved with amendments and additions by Law no. 182/2016.

In 2018 were established the first Local Gastronomic Points. They are mainly located in areas with tourist potential in Romania: the Danube Delta, the mountain area, but also in other locations that benefit from widely known local specifics.

The current delimitation of the mountain area is as follows: within the National Rural Development Program (NRDP), the mountain area includes 658 territorial administrative units. It is also known as the "disadvantaged mountain area" (DMA). Localities included in the DMA can benefit from both European development funds and national funds. According to the Joint Order MADR 97/MDRAP 1332 of 2019, there is a new delimitation, also called "extended mountain area" (EMA), which includes 948 localities. The difference of 290 localities that are not included in the NRDP can only benefit from national development funds. For this reason, the study addresses both the "disadvantaged mountain area" and the "extended mountain area".

Of the 230 existing units at the end of September 2022 in Romania, 143 are found in the DMA mountain zone and 169 in the extended mountain area (EMA). They come to supplement,

in a harmonious way, the tourist offer already existing in the mountain area.

The increase in the number of LGP starting with 2021, under the conditions of a declining market of public catering units, is due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. This was also influenced by a better explanation of the factors responsible for the valorization of food products, in the framework of regional meetings organized by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development with representatives of the Veterinary Health and Food Safety Directorates (VHFSD) and the County Agriculture Directorates (CAD), at a development region level. These meetings had as a main theme the identification of the minimum conditions necessary for the registration of a LGP and the establishment of unitary practices at the national level regarding their registration by NSVFA.

At the end of the third quarter of 2022, both at national level and in the mountain area (DMA & EMA), it can be observed almost a halving of the number of opened LGPs, compared to 2021.

However, there is a very high demand for following the professional training courses for people who are connected to the Local Gastronomic Points. These courses are organized free of charge by the National Agency of the Mountain Area.

CONCLUSIONS

The importance of gastronomic tourism in the tourism economy is also revealed by the fact that many countries have developed strategies dedicated to gastronomic tourism, based on the basic gastronomic units, located mainly in the countryside, which are able to value the products specific to the place, area or region and to contribute to the local economic growth. With the same aim, in order to be able to value local products, many countries have taken steps to include in the non-material cultural heritage of the

humanity, UNESCO, the culinary experience that they recommend to tourists who want to enrich their gastronomic culture, the most suitable example being the registration of the French gastronomy, DOLMA (meat rolls in vine leaves) by Azerbaijan or that of the Belgian beer culture.

The development of sustainable tourism in the rural area and especially in the mountain area and the Danube Delta represents a factor in valuing natural and human resources, increasing the standard of living, stabilizing the population, maintaining cultural identity, increasing economic power at local and national level, in the conditions of preserving the ecological balance and protecting the natural environment.

This type of organization supports those who produce basic food and want to offer public food services in complete safety for the consumer, without owning tourist guesthouses or other organized forms of tourism. It is a facility for family-type units that want to provide small-scale tourism: gastronomic tourism, agritourism, rural tourism, ecotourism, cultural tourism and others.

Local Gastronomic Points are represented by small, private kitchens where traditional cooking is done by ordinary people with culinary talent, people who know local recipes handed down from generation to generation.

Eating food in a LGP represents living an experience based on fundamental values: sociability, authenticity, simplicity, sustainability, sharing/sharing food, words and parts of the soul with the people who are at the same table with you and with the host.

LGP visitors are viewed by the hosts rather as guests, with all that means opening the house for them / welcoming into the house an unknown person who comes to visit and for whom you put on the table the food and drink available at that moment. A visitor of a LGP is a guest and not a simple consumer, the consumer being often identified as having a simple source of income, part of a commercial transaction.

Some of the expressions that can characterize the food prepared in LGP are: "it's like at mother's home", "it's like at grandmother's", "it's like at the country side", "it's like in the old days", "it's like in the Delta", "it's like at the Mountain", "it's like at the sheep farm", etc.

The local food is prepared according to traditional culinary recipes specific to the area and is cooked and served directly to the final consumer by the person operating the LGP.

The development of LGPs will form the basis for the development of a strategy for national gastronomic tourism. By creating short food chains, from the perspective of opening the market opportunity for farmers, by promoting and selling agricultural products close to the source of production, in accordance with the objectives of the European "from farm to consumer" strategy, will be created the premises for the transition to a healthier and more sustainable food system.

However, in order to have a complete regulatory framework, including fiscal requirements, it is necessary to define the Local Gastronomic Point as a public food unit in Annex no. 1 of GD 843/1999 and the subsequent establishment of the fiscal requirement framework of these units, especially those legally organized in the form of APP, IE or FE.

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