

Strategy for the planning of sustainable culinary experiences



Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts
Rural Development Association
Purpan Engineering School
University of Barcelona
In Loco Association. Intervention. Formation. Studies for local development
Agency for Rural Development of Istria Ltd. Pazin
Technical Institute of Heraklion, Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Troodos Network Thematic Centre

October 2019

DELIVERABLE INFORMATION	
Project acronym:	MEDFEST
Project title:	MED Culinary heritage experiences: how to create sustainable tourist destinations
Axis:	3 Protection and promotion of the Mediterranean natural and cultural resources
Objective:	3.2 To enhance the development of sustainable and responsible coastal and maritime tourism in the MED area
URL of project website:	https://medfest.interreg-med.eu
Deliverable number:	5.3.1
Title of deliverable:	Final strategy
WP:	5 Transferring
Activity:	5.3 Finalisation of the strategy for the planning and managing of sustainable culinary tourism
Partners in charge (authors):	ZRC SAZU
Partners involved:	All partners
Status:	Final version
Date:	31. 10. 2019

The information and views set out in this strategy are those of the authors and the Programme authorities are not liable for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

Table of contents

5	<i>1 INTRODUCTION</i>
5	1.1 Goals and main principles
6	1.2 The main characteristics of sustainable culinary heritage experience in the Mediterranean area – SCHEMA
7	1.3 Vision on what a SCHEMA is
10	<i>2 DEVELOPMENT SCENARIOS</i>
10	2.1 Scenario A - the initiators are tourism organizations and policy makers
12	2.2 Scenario B - the initiators are local food associations and societies
13	2.3 Scenario C - the initiators are individuals and small-scale private companies
16	<i>3 STRATEGIC GUIDELINES: STEPS FOR THE PREPARATION OF THE ACTION PLAN</i>
18	<i>4 CAPACITY BUILDING</i>
19	<i>5 RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PRACTICE</i>
22	<i>Project information</i>

1 INTRODUCTION

Despite the lack of strategies, policies and research work on the topic, the MED space is rich with long and diverse culinary traditions that embody the cultural heritage of the area. This tradition, coupled with innovative approaches in the hospitality sector, can form the basis for the conversion of culinary heritage practices into sustainable tourism products which leads to the creation of sustainable Mediterranean destinations.

The Strategy for the planning of sustainable culinary experiences is essentially a set of directions and recommendations, which are based on the study of successful Sustainable Culinary Heritage Experiences in the Mediterranean Area - SCHEMAS and good practices. We did not aim at 'reinventing' the wheel, our goal was rather to make a document where the most common development scenarios for the creating or enhancing of culinary tourism products are presented. These scenarios are based on real and successful SCHEMAS that give results, are sustainable and tackle the inherent problems of the MED space. Although the SCHEMAS are embedded in specific territorial contexts and are 'local' by nature, we have found that some of them possess certain practices which are general and transferrable to other locations and territorial contexts. The development scenarios presented in this strategy have thus a transnational dimension, fitted to the specific Mediterranean context.

In our vision this strategy will be used as a helpful tool for the promotion of the utilisation of traditional knowledge, local agriculture production and local consumption to create or enhance sustainable culinary tourist attractions away from the traditional "sun, sea & sand" destinations. Moreover, we wish to reinforce the Mediterranean identity among the locals and their benefit from the economic and social impacts of culinary tourism.

In the strategy we first present the general principles and goals that we wish to achieve in the long run by promoting new and enhanced culinary tourism products. We also present the basic concept of the SCHEMA and introduce the three specific objectives of it – economic sustainability; promotion of culinary products; promotion of the territory. The main body of the strategy presents three scenarios which follow these specific objectives and draw from our studying of the motives and driving forces behind the successful culinary experiences. In order to make the strategy user-friendly for the local communities and practitioners we also include guidelines for the development of action plans, some aspects on capacity building activities, and recommendations learned from the practice.

1.1 Goals and main principles

By introducing the *Strategy for the planning of sustainable culinary experiences* our goals are:

- to use culinary tourism as a means of attracting new visitors and increasing economic activity in/during the off-season in the MED space;
- to use culinary tourism as a link between the coastal tourist centres and the less developed coastal hinterland;
- to valorise and maximise the use of local (natural, cultural and social) resources and help protect (and develop) the culinary heritage for future generations.

The MEDFEST project and the *Strategy for the planning of sustainable culinary experiences* are based on the following principles: diversification, sustainability, safeguarding of cultural (culinary) heritage, creativity and participation.

The first one is the economic **diversification** of less central and more marginal regions in the Mediterranean. This macro-region is characterised by the polarity between the extremely developed (touristic, port, urban coastal areas) and more fragile areas in the rural coastal hinterland. We recognised culinary tourism as a possible activity to bring additional income, to diversify the economic base, but also to bring extra employment possibilities which could help prevent social and demographic erosion.

Our second principle is **sustainability**. Sustainable tourism, as understood by the World Tourism Organisation, establishes a suitable balance between the environmental (offering local quality produce, maintaining cultural landscape and biodiversity, responsible use of local resources), economic (diversification, employment) and socio-cultural (strengthening the sense of community, fostering social innovations, bridging age and gender gaps ...) aspects of tourism development.

The safeguarding of cultural (culinary) heritage is the third principle. We believe that one way to protect the heritage is to use it in everyday context and thus ensure its transfer to and existence for future generations. By culinary heritage we mean the preserving and passing on of knowledge of food making (from raw materials to cooking), the use of traditional ingredients, food consumption, presentation to conviviality, etc.

Creativity and participation are the last main principle closely connected with the safeguarding of cultural heritage. We believe it is important to use the traditional ways of food production and consumption, upgraded with a new creative input, new technologies or innovations to make them attractive, and contemporary culinary tourism products. Through direct participation and co-creation together with the members of the local community, visitors can be provided with a real experience and learn about the tangible and intangible culinary heritage.

It is important to stress that every new or enhanced SCHEMA should adhere to the abovementioned principles and address one or more of these strategy goals.

1.2 The main characteristics of sustainable culinary heritage experience in the Mediterranean area – SCHEMA

The main characteristics of the concept built within the framework of the MEDFEST project are directly linked to the words making up the SCHEMA acronym (Sustainable Culinary Heritage Experience in the Mediterranean Area).

Sustainability

In 1998 the European Sustainable Tourism Charter defined sustainability as an activity which respects and protects in the long run the natural, cultural and social resources, contributes positively to the economic development and to the personal development of the local people and visitors. From now on the sustainability paradigm involves a new dimension: going beyond the traditional pillars (economic development, preservation of natural resources, social equity, governance), the cultural axis is now an equivalent pillar too. In this perspective, the culinary heritage and the agricultural practices, which shaped the Mediterranean landscapes for centuries, are an important part of the cultural dimension. Thus, the sustainability of a culinary experience must consider two important issues:

- the territorial benefits for local communities resulting from the presence of the experience,
- the capacity of local stakeholders to be involved and to keep control of the experience.

Culinary Heritage

Like any other type of heritage, a culinary heritage must be appropriated and then transmitted by a group, a community, or by an individual in a context of strong interest by tourists and consumers. The components of a given culinary heritage can be tangible (food products, seeds, breeds ...) but also intangible, like the symbolic elements and the know-how. A culinary heritage has to be linked to a historical anteriority, however, it should not remain "frozen" in the past. Its enhancement also needs to involve innovative elements, both in terms of the type of experience as well as its content. The stakeholders involved in a culinary heritage experience must be able to emphasize the dimensions which go beyond food consideration and refer to the territorial context (culture, history, architecture, handicraft, landscape ...). This means that a culinary experience must necessarily be based on a collective/transversal dynamic and involve numerous local stakeholders: the tourist sector, the farmers, public authorities, representatives from the field of education, health, cooking, catering, retailers, transports, energy and environment sectors, and local associations.

Experience

In marketing strategies, the basic principle of experiential tourism lies in the will to immerse the visitors in a perceived authentic reality and to generate feelings which go beyond simple satisfaction. A visitor involved in a culinary experience must become an active participant (for example of cooking classes or tasting sessions), and not only a consumer. Two key factors are highlighted: the emotional fulfilment and the perceived quality. Specific attention must also be paid to the human dimension, through the ambiance felt by the visitors, the sensory stimulations (sight, taste, smell) and a wide variety of human emotions (pleasure, well-being, curiosity, involvement, sharing). These feelings are based on a specific concept with the symbolic components of the experience (place, history, people, ...).

The Mediterranean Area

The Mediterranean anchoring of culinary experiences is an important issue, given the positive image of this area for culinary traditions and its official recognition by UNESCO. Naturally, this territorial identity concerns the food products - wine, olive oil, some fruits and vegetables as well as products coming from small ruminants farming - are without doubt emblematic Mediterranean resources. This Mediterranean anchoring can also concern other dimensions of the environment (culture, landscape) and the people themselves through their personal belonging. Nevertheless, even if the field of Mediterranean culinary experiences is very large, the strategy proposed here requires a hinterland location away from the major tourist flows. With this in mind, the rural dimension of culinary experience is crucial.

1.3 Vision on what a SCHEMA is

Based on the above-mentioned considerations, a general **definition of a Sustainable Culinary Heritage Experience in a Mediterranean Area** could be the following: a SCHEMA is an action enhancing natural and/or cultural resources bound to food products of a specific area for tourism purposes.

This action can take several forms:

- culinary events, like fairs, markets or festivals,
- services connected to food products, like tastings, visits, cooking classes,
- tourist sites networks dedicated to food or culinary products, like tourist routes,

- enhancement of a professional activity through tourism, like agritourism or industrial tourism,
- specific tourist sites dedicated to food or culinary products, like museums.

Whatever the form of the culinary experience, two important characteristics can be underlined:

- the "transversality": a culinary experience must develop links with other activities (culture, education, handicrafts, sport, outdoor activities, ...),
- the collective dynamic: a culinary experience cannot be limited to an individual initiative but necessary implies a group of stakeholders, whereby this collectivity doesn't need to be formalized.

In that respect, a given Mediterranean culinary experience is located at the crossroads of four main specific dimensions: one or several food products/recipes on which the experience is based, a specific place (geographical and social environment: culture, landscape), a specific moment/event (time of stay, visit, tasting) and an active and respectful involvement of the visitors. With reference to the additional dimensions to be included in the concept of sustainable culinary heritage experience in the Mediterranean areas we should add the OUTER CONTEXT. While the SPECIFIC PLACE refers to a distinct community (with peculiar socio-economic and cultural aspects), the OUTER CONTEXT refers to the dynamics (already existing or to be developed) with the organizations, institutions outside the local context where the SCHEMA is implemented. The role of the already existing or possible new connections with the organizations that do not belong to the area but that could have an impact on the SCHEMA should also be taken into consideration (see Figure 1).

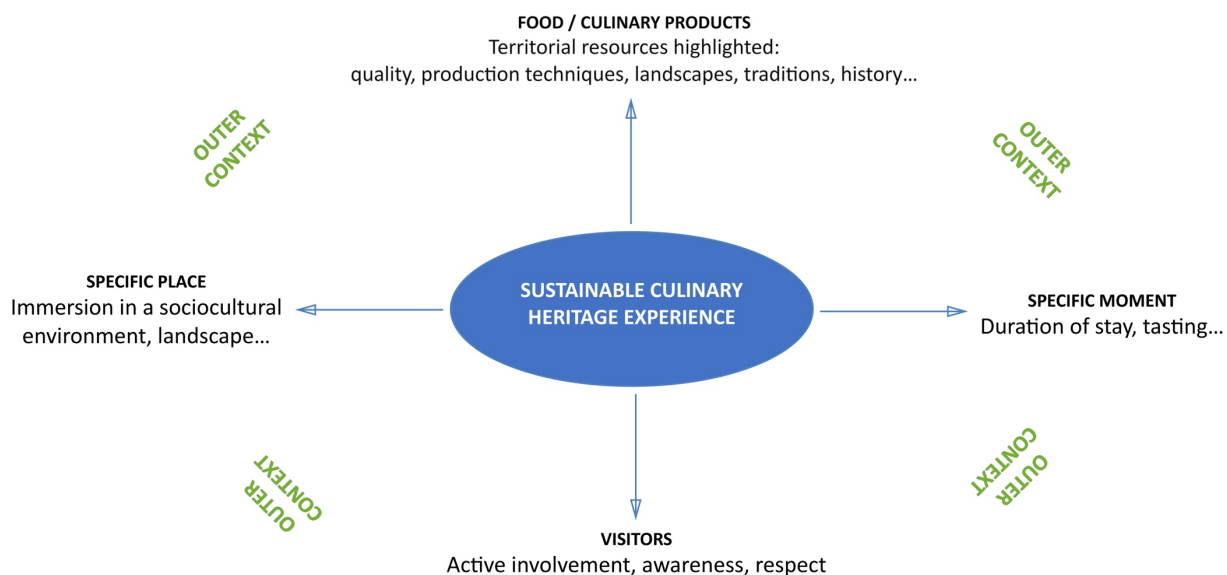


Figure 1: The concept of sustainable culinary heritage experience in the Mediterranean area (Author: Julien Frayssignes).

Finally, a culinary experience must also be envisaged as a rural development tool for local stakeholders who have to be aware of the impact of their initiative in terms of sustainability:

- economic sustainability - improvement of the local economy and a greater added value for the farmers, jobs creation, diversification of the income;
- social sustainability - strengthening of the sense of community, fostering of social innovations, links between stakeholders, intergenerational dialogue, role of women, participation of local communities;
- environmental sustainability - preservation of landscapes and biodiversity, creation of visitor's sense of responsibility through awareness, reduction of ecological footprint;
- cultural sustainability - preservation of culinary traditions, production methods, intercultural understanding.

2 DEVELOPMENT SCENARIOS

The stakeholders and their networks are crucial in organizing and sustaining of culinary experience. The **most important** stakeholders involved in the Mediterranean culinary heritage experiences are tourism and rural development sectors operating in the frame of public authorities, local food producers, associations and private holders. In numerous cases these stakeholders are the driving force in initiating the process of creation of unique culinary experiences. They usually invite other stakeholders to join them. While tourism organisations and agencies for local and rural development are looking for new tourism products which would lure visitors to a hinterland, local food producers are involved as suppliers of fresh locally grown food (e.g. vegetables, fruits, wine, olive oil), however, they can also be holders of culinary experiences. Apart from being food suppliers, local food producers can provide services such as farm visits, grape harvesting, olive oil tasting, etc. They are indispensable at fairs and similar culinary events. The local food associations and societies have a similar role in providing food. Furthermore, their mission is also in the rising of an awareness about the traceability of products and food implications on the human health. Last but not least, there are private holders who are looking for economic benefits and personal fulfilment, trying to create job positions or at least additional income. Based on these findings 3 development scenarios for the creation of the Mediterranean culinary heritage experiences are demonstrated, depending on who holds and organises culinary experiences, what their motivation and expectations are, and how the stakeholder network is developed.

2.1 Scenario A – the initiators are tourism organizations and policy makers

Stakeholders' network

In cases where a tourism organisation (tourist office or tourist-information centre), sectoral or development agency and/or local authority (municipality) decides to create a culinary experience their aim is primarily to diversify the tourist offer of the area by developing attractive sustainable tourism products. This is generally done in a top down approach in which a tourism organisation outlines an idea, organises meetings/workshops and invites the stakeholders: local associations, local producers, service providers and experts (see Figure 2). They form an organisational board and start working on the development of a culinary experience. The stakeholders are encouraged to join this initiative and have an opportunity to offer their products and services. If a culinary experience is successful, it can be upgraded through the expansion of the offer and networking with similar stakeholders, organisation of additional events and wider promotion.

The benefit of this approach is that the experience gets at least some financial support from the local or regional authorities, while the main **weaknesses** are the dependency on the main actor, i.e. a tourism organisation, and a potential absence of an efficient and powerful coordinator/leader. A lack of proper coordination and organisation can threaten the existence of a culinary experience, so this aspect needs to be considered from the very beginning.

The main motives for culinary experiences initiated by tourism organisations are to increase the visibility of the regions as tourist destinations, to network and establish connections between service providers and local producers, and to prolong the tourism offer to the off-season. Networking enables them to provide a common narrative and contribute to a diversification of tourism products and development of regional tourist services.

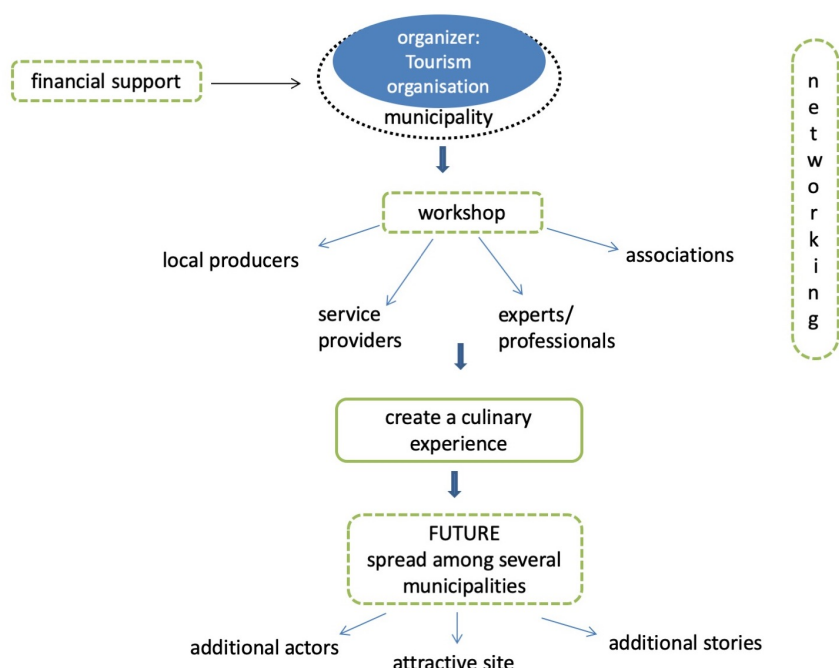


Figure 2: The creation of culinary experiences in a top-down approach when the initiator is a tourism organisation with the support of local authorities. Potential actions are marked with dash lines (Author: Mateja Šmid Hribar).

The role of cultural heritage

Culinary heritage can be a strong element in the increasing of the appeal for tourists and the visibility of a destination but it also represents a linkage between agriculture, gastronomy and the hospitality sector. There are several possibilities how to create a tourist experience around it, for example by explaining the regional history and showing how it reflects in culinary heritage; by safeguarding autochthonous animal breeds or plant varieties (common effort); by demonstrating linkages between the culinary heritage and the local lifestyle; by establishing a connection with handicrafts.

Innovativeness is an important element in the development of culinary experiences and can be introduced in several ways: by combining culinary activities with other activities, by showing the diversification in the use of different products (different stakeholders involved), by digital support. The latter depends on the availability of substantial financial funds.

The role of the existing policies

In this top-down approach the proximity between culinary experiences and public policies can lead to an emergence of a specific collective and formalized governance that is able to stabilize the partnership between the stakeholders. This formalization can be based on written official documents like charters of good practices or calls for tenders. Furthermore, the experience can be strengthened by two kinds of processes:

- its integration in other global strategic plans (tourism, development, environment, ...) implemented on a local or regional scale,
- by official public certifications concerning the activity (tourist or ecological tools) or the area (e.g. Natura 2000, Global Geoparks Network, or UNESCO recognition).

In any case, the support of local authorities remains crucial for the existence of a lot of culinary experiences.

2.2 Scenario B - the initiators are local food associations and societies

Stakeholder's network

The main initiator of a culinary experience is an association or cooperative whose main objectives are to raise awareness of the typical local products and related production/processing techniques, and consequently to sell these products. The associations can use the participatory bottom-up approach and create culinary experience through workshops and meetings with other stakeholders. They invite different stakeholders: local authorities (municipalities), experts, tourism organisations, service providers, local producers, business owners, and interested citizens (see Figure 3). The role of the civil society and the private stakeholders is to show how the presented products can be used in daily life and what are their benefits, which can help sell the products.

The benefits of this approach are a strong network, diversified offer and the know-how provided by the variety of stakeholders. Unstable financial resources are its main **weakness**.

The main motivation of the local food associations and societies in organizing a culinary experience is to participate in an effective promotion and widespread recognition of the specific local products/diets/culture. They address heritage preservation and transfer of knowledge onto tradition, heritage and health.



Figure 3: The creation of culinary experiences in a bottom up approach when the initiator is one or more local associations. Potential actions are marked with dash lines (Author: Mateja Šmid Hribar).

The role of cultural heritage

Culinary heritage is in its essence an intangible heritage – it is the knowledge and know-how passed on from one person to another, from one generation to another. In the process of transfer culinary heritage undergoes a constant change which can be the focus of culinary experiences: different use of traditional products/ingredients and their use in the traditional dishes, different cultivation techniques and their development.

The safeguarding of tradition can be a priority, especially when a culinary experience is strongly leaning on the historic background that shaped the culinary heritage. However, when the promotion and valorisation of specific products are in focus, it is important to present these products in an innovative and contemporary way and thus demonstrate the diversity of their use.

The organizing of a culinary experience can bring about a capacity building in the form of networking, cooperation and professional growth and deep knowledge about the product (healing properties, history, preservation, ways of cultivation and customs). A strong motivation for the food associations and societies to initiate this kind of a tourism product is not only the economic benefit, but also the concern for the development of the local community and the enhancement of local resources. Concrete actions for the improvement of the local environment by stimulating environmentally friendly behaviour of visitors are recommended: cooperation with the transport sector to promote sustainable mobility, promotion of a healthy life-style, sustainable waste management, etc.

The role of the existing policies

Even if communication between the culinary experiences led by the local associations and public policies is difficult to achieve, there are some possibilities, as for example through the Memorandum of Understanding. Certification strategies can also be helpful in improving the culinary experiences, for food products in particular (European certifications like Protected Denomination of Origin, Protected Geographical Indication, organic products).

2.3 Scenario C – the initiators are individuals and small-scale private companies

Stakeholders' network

Most culinary experiences with direct and instant economic benefits are initiated and organized by individuals and small private businesses. Private holders invite local producers, service providers, local handicrafts, experts and researchers, local and foreign schools and universities, foreign companies, ... (see Figure 4). In most cases stakeholders are selected and invited based on the positive personal and business experiences from the past - trust and strong motivation/engagement of all stakeholders are crucial elements in these partnerships. It seems that this type of connections provides the most diverse and the strongest network among the stakeholders (compared to the other two scenarios), also because they don't require long bureaucratic formal procedures. They can also be easily expanded, attracting new stakeholders, influence the innovativeness of the offer, promotion and marketing approach.

The benefits of this type of stakeholders' network are flexibility and freedom in organizing, adjusting and innovating a culinary experience. The **weaknesses** are the financial risk taken by a small number of stakeholders involved, and higher costs of marketing and promotion.

The motivation in this case is primarily the economic benefit as well as the preserving and transferring of knowledge. Through stories created around the culinary experiences many private

holders educate their visitors on the importance and value of the heritage that surrounds them. They wish to contribute to the sense of community and identity and to raise awareness of the benefits for people's health coming from the consumption of high-quality products. Promotion and wider recognition are also crucial aspects for them. Thus, it is important to be involved in the already existing websites, leaflets, common market appearance and similar activities supported by tourism organisations and municipalities.



Figure 4: The creation of culinary experiences when the initiator is a private owner or a small company. Potential actions are marked with dash lines (Author: Mateja Šmid Hribar).

The role of cultural heritage

Working with a small number of visitors allows the organisers to present culinary heritage more passionately, explaining the techniques, the origin, the procedures of how traditional dishes are made and how traditional ingredients are used in detail. The small private sector needs to exhibit the highest level of innovativeness in order to get the attention needed. The innovativeness is reflected in the “personal touch” added to the experience - the key element being that the visitors are usually seeking, and also co-creating a tourist experience. Small holders are usually the ones who adapt more quickly to the modern dietary requirements, such as vegan, gluten free recipes. They are more open to the experimenting and testing of new and creative ideas where they can observe the reactions of their consumers, exchange opinions and gather on-the-spot feedback.

The organizing a culinary experience usually means a close cooperation of different sectors (gastronomy, handicraft, agriculture, marketing, tour operators) and it is a good opportunity for the development of a social entrepreneurship and a direct cooperation with the R&D sector.

The role of the existing policies

The bottom-up dynamic that characterizes culinary experiences led by the private stakeholders is very often based on family businesses. The first big issue lies with the visibility of the experience and more specifically with its recognition by the local public authorities, in particular to get financial support. Thus, for a lot of "small-scale" experiences the development of an activity to reach a "critical size" can be the first step on the path to recognition.

In the same vein, the second issue is bound to the professionalization of initiatives. Due to their size and/or their family dimension, many experiences express a wish to "get out of amateurism" and implement a professional tourism activity by improving all its aspects (the welcoming of visitors, services, business plan, communication, signage, assessment, ...). In that case, their participation in trainings is very important to strengthen their skills.

By contrast, several experiences want to remain in a more informal and confidential logic. The reasons for this are multiple: flexibility and reactivity, maintaining control/freedom, preservation of the authenticity of the experience.

These different strategies reflect the choices made by the people in charge of the experiences. In any case, the preservation of the "intimacy" of a given initiative is not totally incompatible with the formalization procedure (through the integration with the national or international culinary networks, for example) or with specific forms of certification (Slow food partnership).

3 STRATEGIC GUIDELINES: STEPS FOR THE PREPARATION OF THE ACTION PLAN

In order to create a SCHEMA capable of producing long-term positive effects on the socio-economic sustainability of local communities and especially on the enhancement of tourism flows during low season, two conditions must be met: 1) full engagement of the local actors and stakeholders; and 2) the forming of responsible commitments. They are extremely important independently from the typology of the actors (tourism organizations and policy makers; local food associations and societies; individuals and small private companies) and especially meaningful when a bottom-up approach is utilized for the development of a new culinary experience. If a more “centralized” top-down strategy for the designing a new SCHEMA is chosen, both conditions are still relevant to the promotion of the growth of the created events and their links with the local community.

An effective tool that can effectively contribute to the achievement of the above-mentioned conditions is the participatory action plan. It is based on the assumption that no one, no expert, group, organization or an institution, dominates the creation of new initiatives, plans, processes, or in this case, a culinary experience. Within the framework of a participatory action plan, everyone's participation should be welcomed, respected, and considered, and every stakeholder should have an opportunity to gain a financial benefit. This means that all involved actors should take part in the planning process while having the opportunity to play a role in the decision-making phase and possibly in the implementation of the plan once drafted.

The sequence of an effective participatory action plan:

- **Designation of one initiator or a small group of people interested in sharing this role**

Having one or more persons who are responsible for the overall coordination of the SCHEMA is a starting point. Strong motivation and high sense of responsibility are indispensable to ensure the development and sustainability of the initiative.

- **Understanding the context**

Knowing the local situation refers to the analysing of the existing successful and unsuccessful tourism experiences present in the territory, and to the resources with the potential to be maximized. Before designing a new experience, it is crucial to evaluate how it is rooted in the territory, how it can be linked to other activities/initiatives, what is the level of innovation it can deliver and its capacity to safeguard the cultural heritage. It is also extremely important to determine the role that the existing policies can play in the development of a new tourism/culinary product.

- **Identification of the SCHEMA's players**

The initiator(s) has an important responsibility to identify and involve the main actors and stakeholders to design, build and kick-off the SCHEMA. A clear understanding of their needs and benefits, that are either a) economic, b) related to personal desires, or c) a vision for a more sustainable and attractive community, opens the door for an active engagement. This is essential since they will be directly responsible for the implementing and ensuring of sustainability of the new experience.

- **Joint selection of the pivotal natural or cultural assets**

The involved stakeholders must choose WHICH resource will be bound to food products of a specific area for tourism purposes and HOW the action should be shaped. These can be either

culinary events, services connected to food products, tourist sites networks dedicated to food or culinary products, the enhancement of a professional activity through tourism, specific tourist sites dedicated to food or culinary products.

- **Designing a solid structure**

The initiator(s) working together with the engaged local actors and stakeholders will need to agree on the actions, the timeline, the communication and monitoring of the activities they will be responsible for in order to ensure the actual long-term implementation of the new SCHEMA. Regular meetings of the local key actors and stakeholders involved, effective internal and external communication flows, a timeframe, the tools to take stock of the situation, and a “dialogic approach” to face unplanned results and challenging situations are all part of a strategic participatory action plan.

4 CAPACITY BUILDING

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the importance and the potential of the organizing of capacity building activities for the stakeholders. Even if this strategy is focusing on the creation or improvement of a culinary experience, sufficient attention needs to be given to the consolidation of the network of stakeholders involved in it to create or strengthen trust among them, and also to equip them with the necessary knowledge they need in order to offer sustainable tourism products to visitors.

The potential of experience and knowledge exchange is often unjustifiably underestimated or completely neglected. In order to reverse this trend, we present two forms of capacity building and a number of advantages they bring:

- **Professional trainings** are a very effective tool for the empowering of the stakeholders, mainly because they can be tailored to their concrete needs and deficiencies. Many stakeholders in culinary tourism are entering an unknown professional field and have to develop new skills. Farmers/producers, for example, become involved in the tourism sector and thus need a lot of new, practical and legal information on how to run the business; they are faced with new organisational models, hygienic, safety and insurance requirements, marketing tools referring to the online and offline communication and promotion activities. In order to ask for public support (financial, promotional, in-kind contributions), the stakeholders need to be skilful also in the administrative/formal procedures. Trainings can thus be organised for several groups of the stakeholders and for different purposes: to improve their business skills, financial management, to learn about the legislative/safety aspects, to set up a marketing strategy and promotional campaigns, to learn a foreign language, to learn about the different cultures of the visitors, to practice storytelling, hospitality, ... Trainings are most effective when they are organised in small groups of highly motivated participants where individual's issues/challenges/cases can be discussed, meaning that the flexibility of the programme is greater and the learning process supported by practice.
- **Study visits** are a common form of knowledge transfer. They are usually more appealing, connected with leisure and opportunities to spend the time learning in a relaxed atmosphere. Despite this, they should not be underestimated. Study visits can be a source of inspiration, creative and innovative ideas on how to improve a particular product, foster one of its dimensions, e.g. ecological, social, economic, an opportunity to discover new possibilities for the diversification of an offer, and a way of learning about the complementarity of different productions and products (e.g. gastronomy/art, handicraft; vine & oysters). Study visits empower and encourage stakeholders to improve their own tourism products, also by changing the role they usually play. "Hosts become the guests", tourists with their own expectations. In this role they often take a more critical stand, noticing weaknesses they do not notice when they themselves are concerned, and learn on someone else's "mistakes". This is a valuable lesson and experience that can't be compared with any other tool.

It is recommended that capacity building (trainings and study visits) is a part of the creation of every culinary experience, following all the above-mentioned scenarios. It should be tailored to stakeholders' needs, not only in terms of content but also in terms of temporal and financial availability. It should be offered to highly motivated participants who are willing to invest their time and perhaps also money. Whether they are organised once or repeatedly, we recommend that an evaluation questionnaire is used to collect the participants' impressions, recommendations for improvement and evaluation of the usefulness of the trainings or study visits.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PRACTICE

In this chapter we introduce the lessons learned during the implementation of the MEDFEST project activities, i.e. the creating of eight new sustainable culinary experiences, the preparation of action plans, the testing of the experiences, the organising of the capacity building activities for the local stakeholders and the engaging of external experts to evaluate the work done. The recommendations are grouped in three categories: the creating, managing and promoting of sustainable culinary heritage experience, and explained in more detail.

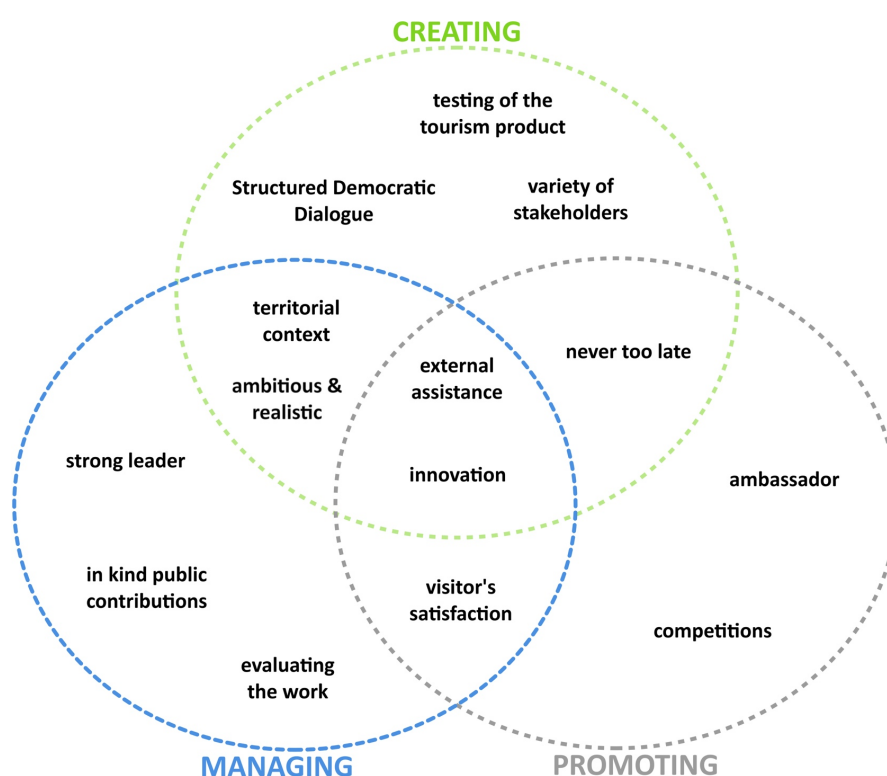


Figure 5: MEDFEST recommendations from the practice (Author: Nika Razpotnik Visković).

- One of the successful and recommended approaches when creating a culinary experience is the process of **structured democratic dialogue**. This is a deeply reasoned, scientific methodology for a large-scale collaborative design, which compiles collective knowledge of diverse stakeholders who experience a common challenge. Despite the fact that it is complex and time consuming, this process ensures a high level of engagement of the stakeholders and a high level of their expectations being met, considering different motives, skills and knowledge. It should be stressed that this dialogue must be implemented as soon as possible in the process of the designing of the experience to avoid problems of communication and possible feelings of exclusion.
- A **variety of stakeholders** can be involved in the creation of a culinary experience, including organizations and businesses that do not seem to have anything or have very little to do with the culinary or tourism dimension of the experience, e.g. clothes and household shops, cafés and

bookstores located near the location of the culinary experience. They can promote the experience, take part in the activities, host a part of the programme, contribute to a common visual identity. However, a research of this variety can be an important element in ensuring the success of the experience, because this variety can also become a challenge (sizes of stakeholders, statutes, needs, strategies and wishes).

- Culinary experiences need to be well articulated, with an appropriate methodology and planning, otherwise they eventually cease to exist. One of the mandatory steps in the creation of a culinary experience is the **testing of the tourism product** in different variations, especially in cases where due to a lack of time or financial support, a market and field research were not carried out. To properly define the target audience of the culinary experience, different target groups might have to test it (general public, elderly people, families ...). We propose an evaluation questionnaire to collect their impressions and recommendations for possible improvement.
- Local stakeholders involved in the design of a culinary experience must constantly be aware of the **territorial context** in which they act: what are the local needs? The issues? The strengths? What is the real identity of the area? Moreover, it is important to consider the limits of the area and its relevance: very often these limits are administrative, given the presence of local authorities. However, the stakeholders must keep in mind that these administrative limits are not always very functional and sometimes have to be exceeded.
- When designing and implementing a culinary heritage experience, it is also important to be **ambitious** about the content, but at the same time also **realistic and modest** when it comes to economic and territorial impact on the development of the area.
- Ideally, the management of a culinary heritage experience should be entrusted to an identified **stakeholder – leader** who will dedicate a significant amount of his/her time to this activity. This leader must have an overall vision of the experience and extended skills. For almost all experiences this point is the key factor ensuring success and durability.
- Getting public funding for the development of a tourism product is always a challenge - it is not limited only to the availability of financial resources but also to regulations of the public financing processes. Finding options for **in kind public contributions** (not directly financial) is one of the possibilities of how to overcome these limitations, e.g. renting a public space for free or at a low price, using marketing channels ...
- One of the most important but also most often neglected aspects is the verifying and **evaluation of work** during the implementation of individual tasks as well as after the work has been completed. This is a process in which organizers inspect whether the goals had been achieved and evaluate the results. They establish what kind of effects were brought on by the results, what could be improved, what new opportunities have arisen. The evaluation goal is to shape the conclusions and propose the measures and recommendations that will contribute to the success of a culinary experience or even influence the transfer of knowledge and practices in other areas.
- For numerous culinary experiences the analysis of the **visitors' satisfaction** can be a very helpful tool in improving the activity by learning more about the customers and thus adapting to the new demands of the market. Ideally, the design of a culinary experience is based on the expectations of the visitors, obtained through a specific study, for example, and not only on the knowledge or notions of the local stakeholders. For example, it seems that for the last few years the success of

"mono-thematic" culinary experiences is decreasing. There is growing trend to connect food or culinary assets to other kinds of activities (hiking, nature tourism) to improve the tourism offer.

The evaluation tools used by the stakeholders are very diverse. Apart from the classic counting of participants, several stakeholders are implementing specific scoreboards to obtain more qualitative information bound to the visitors' profile over a longer period. However, given the small size of culinary experiences and the lack of resources, the assessment remains informal, through a simple book of impressions, direct discussions with the visitors or observation of their attitudes/reactions during the experience.

- Engagement of a recognised and influential professional who is an opinion maker (e.g. a well-known chef or food blogger) with strong connections, outspread network, and a capacity to motivate and inspire, and also to attract visitors and media attention, has proven to be a good strategy for the consolidating of the stakeholder network and partnership. This person doesn't have to be the coordinator of the culinary experience, but its internal and external **ambassador**.

- It is important not to be afraid to compare one's product (culinary experience) with other products on the market and to participate in **competitions** for the recognition, awards or financial support. In case of success, the stakeholders will be even more motivated to take part in the culinary experiences; but any other result is a step in the learning and development process, too.

- It is **never too late** to change the image of a culinary experience and develop a long-lasting and consolidated reputation.

- It is necessary to engage professionals from the field of design, photography, text writing, storytelling, marketing etc. in order to obtain quality communication and promotional materials, and establish solid storytelling bases, appropriated by all engaged stakeholders. A storytelling framework can be done by tourist offices/organisations with the support of a copyright and content expert, and it can be a combination of food products and other local tangible and intangible assets of the area (biodiversity, landscapes, history and gastronomy).

It is too idealistic to expect that every public tourism institution will get engaged and be successful in marketing, thus it is better to include **external assistance** from the beginning to get help with the planning, designing and selling of the culinary experiences. The question of coordination, logistics and marketing/selling of the packages should actively be considered already from the start.

- Although Mediterranean culinary heritage experiences are always based on tradition, it is also crucial that the offer remains innovative. This preoccupation with **innovation** must be constant in the stakeholders' strategy. This innovation must in particular consider the different segment of visitors and visitors' expectations in terms of climate change, sustainable transports, social equity, short supply chains, circular economy and the like.

Project information



Project website: <https://medfest.interreg-med.eu>

Project MEDFEST is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund.

Project partners

