



## TRAVEL AGENCIES' ROLE IN GASTRONOMY TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AND A GASTRONOMY TOUR EXAMPLE

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### KEYWORDS

*Gastronomy Tourism*  
*Travel Agency*  
*Tour Development*  
*Tourism Product Differentiation*

### ABSTRACT

Gastronomy tourism embraces a wide range of gastronomic opportunities for tourists while contributing to sustainability, rural development and the protection of culinary heritage. It diversifies and revitalizes tourism as one of the industry's essential element and emerging segments. However, there is a scarcity of research on the issue related to travel agencies. The purpose of this research is to determine whether travel agencies in Izmir use culinary elements and gastronomic sources as themes in their tour packages to highlight the gastronomy tourism potential of the city, and explore ways of developing this approach. Thus, the contribution of this study is threefold. First, travel agencies in downtown Izmir were surveyed in terms of their actual gastronomy tourism product offers and future plans to create one. The survey results revealed that gastronomy was not promoted as a principal theme due to a lack of awareness of potential local and regional culinary resources. Second, experts in the gastronomy and tourism industries were contacted using purposive sampling. Their opinions were sought regarding places, products and activities that could be included in a gastronomy tour package. Finally, an example tour program was created based on expert opinions along with the author's contribution.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As of 21st century, tourism industry has witnessed significant changes in the demand profile of tourists in terms of their expectations and behaviors, resulting in a prominent shift in the means of communication, the promotion and nature of services. Tourists have become more experienced, with more discretionary time and budgets, and seek active experiences that are based on learning and experimenting of places with all their senses (De Albuquerque Meneguel et al., 2019). Food is inextricable of daily life, as well as during travelling, so the strong relation between tourism and food should not be neglected. While food has traditionally been approached as a supportive or complementary product in tourism, researchers have started to examine the connection between food and tourism in more detail in the last two decades. A great number of studies have revealed that tourists' enthusiasm for a region can be considerably affected by an interest in gastronomy (Sio et al., 2021; Dixit, 2019; Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017; du Rand & Heath, 2006; Hjalager & Richards, 2002). Wolf (2020) indicated that tourists spend approximately 25% of their budget on food and beverages; this figure can reach 35% in relatively expensive destinations and fall as low as 15% on more affordable destinations. Foodies, in particular, spend even more than the average of 25%, leading more destinations to focus on food as their core tourism product (du Rand & Heath, 2006).

Travel agencies hold a key role in the tourism system. Some of the key roles of travel intermediaries

can be summarized as contributing to publicity and marketing activities, exploring new tourism destinations, and offering these as a product, creating tours with price alternatives for various segments, standing as a connecting power between suppliers and the public, providing holistic information and rebuilding destination image in the post-crisis period (Da Silva, Costa & Moreira, 2018; Clerides, Nearchou & Pashardes, 2008; del Bosque, San Martín & Collado, 2006; Cavlek, 2002; Lubbe, 2000; Mısırlı, 2010; Reimer, 1990)

Travel intermediaries have an active role in promoting, marketing and branding a destination's image with all its featured aspects, tangible or intangible. They are in direct contact with potential customers, and they offer a purchase convenience to the buyer, bringing all the related services together as a final product. As travel intermediaries interact directly with potential customers, they are aware of the growing demands for authenticity, experimentation and related new travel trends. They operate in a very dynamic and price sensitive market. Moreover, they deal with a wide range of different suppliers, and therefore can easily gather information on various best practices and facilitate the sharing of experiences throughout the supply chain (Barna & Semak, 2020). Their central position in a complex network of suppliers underlines

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their function as an information center. Besides information giving to potential travellers, they design and market various tour packages, set trends, connect stakeholders, and alter the demand profile to the destination. All these responsibilities emphasize the highly strategic role of travel intermediaries. (Klenosky & Gitelson, 1998). Travel agencies bundle all travel related products and services in a package so that tourists can experience the destination as a local would. They select each location for its character and authenticity to make visitors feel at home as an invited guest rather than a tourist. They design each route carefully to immerse visitors in the local culture. They choose different themes based on the region's resources and develop tours accordingly. They tailor their tours to exploit the destinations' tourism potential to its full (Page, 2009).

Amongst other things, they creatively combine natural and cultural sites, tangible and intangible heritage and services in one single attractive package so that it becomes more appealing. Tourism development is highly affected by travel intermediaries' activities. Those with high volume of business are those that are able to create a certain image of the destination in tourists' mind, and their attractive packages can give them control over demand. So, travel agencies affect demand levels if they comprehend market needs well, and cater for all these needs in a tour package (Lubbe, 2000). This way, not only increases the accessibility and visibility of destination, but makes tourists more reliant on intermediaries' offers, and less on those of individual suppliers.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Gastronomy and Tourism

Tourism industry is passing through the processes of globalization; yet, at the same time, tourists have become more interested in experiences based on local identity and culture. The more they travel, the more sophisticated they desire to become. Culinary experience is recently one of the most preferred cultural capital, which has become a major focus for travel. There is a global increase in the number of food-tour companies, food and beverage focused events and food and beverage experience-focused marketing efforts. Based on a recent report of Allied Market Research (2020) that was published in June 2020, the global culinary tourism market size was valued at \$1,116.7 billion in 2019, and is projected to reach \$1,796.5 billion by 2027, registering a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 16.8% from 2020 to 2027. Another statement from the report was that the Online Travel Agency (OTA) segment was the most prominent segment in 2019 based on mode of booking, and it is expected to grow at CAGR of 17.9% through the forecast period, the highest rate ever seen. This is a result of increasing adoption of smart devices as a way to organize travel arrangements. Furthermore, this mode of booking is very practical, and is encouraged by travel agencies' flexible offers.

A destination's cuisine is like a window into its soul. Immersion in another destination's culture is not just about sights, sounds and smell; tastes are also an exceptionally influential in a place's charm and in the understanding of its essence (Le, 2017). Yet, gastronomy was neglected by the tourism industry until 1990s, as it was regarded simply as a

prerequisite for the holiday experience. But today there is a growing recognition of the link between tourism, intangible heritage and gastronomy resulting from the heterogeneity of tourist preferences, increased interest in culture and postmodern consumption styles. The shift from traditional tourism activities to creative tourism made gastronomy even more important; thus, it has become a main focus for promoting travel and an important development focus for tourism authorities (Richards, 2014). According to Boniface (2003), the interest in food and tourism lies in the reaction to the lack of distinctiveness and individuality associated with modernity, industrialization and globalization.

What makes gastronomy so attractive in context of tourism industry is that eating and drinking ranks in the top three favorite activities for tourists; it is the only type of cultural experience that activates all five senses at the same time; and also, it is a universal experience, not dependent on climatic conditions. Besides, it is experiential in terms of being an interactive discovery-oriented activity which all age groups can enjoy (Kivela & Crotts, 2006).

Food tourism as other types of tourism is a complex system involving many stakeholders and interactions that create quality food experiences by applying knowledge and skill. Tourists buy not only products or services, but the total experience offered by these. So, the total image of the product in foodies' mind is shaped by value creation and memorable experiences. Thus, resources should be diversified and transformed into venues, events, infrastructure and skill development, with the collaboration of all related stakeholders (Getz et al., 2014). A destination's food history should be integrated in its branding efforts for potential commercial returns with the formulation of broader strategies and target plans. These gastronomy tourism initiatives should be supported with government regulations, officially-endorsed marketing activities, the consolidation of economic ties between industrial sectors and the countryside, and public awareness, as well as service quality (Henderson, 2004).

A gastronomy tour is not just about visiting places and dining in restaurants during meal times, as a necessity, and considered simply part of the human diet. A gastronomy tour is about traditions, origins and influences of the cuisine and showing tourists how the food is grown, harvested and brought to market. It also involves visiting off the beaten track places previously known only to locals, where tourists can enjoy sampling classic and less well-known specialities. These experiences can include tastings and opportunities for hands-on cooking of local delicacies (Tsai and Wang, 2017). Gastronomy products apply to food and beverages or any food-related activity of a nation's culture and heritage. Thus, the definition, far from being elitist, includes not only one-of-a-kind restaurants, but also street vendors, food carts, trucks, gastro-pubs, wineries, food tours, cooking classes, beverage factories, wine and beer tastings, chocolaterie or bakery visits, culinary trails, gastronomic festivals, farm weekends, cookbooks, food guides and the like (Long, 2013).

### 2.2. Potential of Izmir as a Gastronomic Destination

Izmir is a metropolitan city located on the Aegean coast of the westernmost part of Anatolia. It is the third most populous city in Turkey. It is a popular tourist attraction with various local characteristics

mentioned below; yet, it is not branded as a foodie destination. However, all stakeholders recognize the importance of this emerging market, with a great potential in the near future, and they have taken part in different events, initiatives and projects to promote this. The city is attractive for a large number of tourists for purposes including those with leisure, medical, health, youth, business and cultural purposes. İzmir has a extensive historical background that can be traced back to Neolithic period. This cultural richness stemming from the interaction of various civilizations, contributes to the cultural mosaic of the city. Numerous trade fairs, most of them being international, is a tradition that supports city's economy as a form of business tourism. İzmir has a climatic advantage; the mild mediterranean climate and affluence of sunny days minimize the effects of seasonality that affects many destinations. Besides the historical and religious sites that attracts cultural tourists, its blue flag beaches and thermal sources appeal to leisure travelers. It is home to a great number of coastal touristic towns, hotels and summer houses. With its welcoming and friendly local habitants, İzmir is a symbol of modernity with numerous internationally-accredited public and private universities.. There is an international airport and seaport in the city for accessibility, and consequently, the destination has become a stopover for cruise liners. Its proximity to major destinations via highway connection is another prime advantage (İzmir İl Kültür Turizm Müdürlüğü, n.d.).

İzmir has all the typical characteristics of the Mediterranean food culture thanks to its geographic location, reflecting Aegean regional cuisine with dishes that are rich in olive oil and fresh herb varieties. As the city has been a cradle to various civilizations throughout history, the food culture is shaped by Anatolian, Greek, Levantine, Aegean, Jewish and Armenian influences. This diversity is a natural reflection in its cuisine. Meat dishes and pastry products from Balkan cuisines as well as from non-immigrant cultures are blended harmoniously with fresh herbs, resulting in today's cuisine practices. The result is a combination of tastes including meat dishes, fish plates and fresh greens to appeal to all palates. Nomadic Turks settled down in and around İzmir; Levantines, Greeks, Sefarades, those who came from Western Thrace and the islands such as Crete, Chios, Midilli during the population exchange; other settlers are Bosnians, Macedonians, Albanians and African Arabs. Coastal locations are more influenced by Mediterranean influences. In vicinity coastal districts such as Urla, Karaburun, Seferihisar, Tire, Foça and Çeşme as well as the downtown area, one can find exemplary olive oil dishes prepared from vegetables, herbs, and fish from the bay. This is in contrast to the inner region's cuisine culture, composed mostly of red meat, dairy products and cereals, which is a reflection of nomadic traditions and habitants' engagement in livestock and farming activities. This inner regions's cuisine is found in Bergama, Kınık, Kiraz, Menemen, Ödemiş and Tire districts. Street food is also common in İzmir; "Gevrek", "boyoz" and "kumru" are the best example snacks on the go; the traditional old bazaar "Kemeraltı" area offers cold cuts of sheep head, meatballs on the skewer, and sherbets as alternative snacks (İzmir Kültür ve Turizm Dergisi, n.d.).

Gastronomic tourism has attracted a great interest

in the world in recent years, and the city of İzmir also aims to take its place at the forefront of gastronomic tourism. With its indigenous fresh herbs, fish and seafood, local eating facilities and food and gastronomy-related events hosted in and around the city, İzmir aims to valorise its gastronomic sources to diversify its touristic product offers, alleviate seasonality issues and maintain year-around tourism activities. The initiatives of profit and non-profit organizations, both in public and private sectors, have resulted in a wide range of projects, events and facilities supporting the development of local gastronomic tourism. However, to compete at an international level, branding the city as a gastronomic destination requires commodification and packaging of products and places as a tourism product (Bucak and Araci, 2013).

Stakeholders have been involved in several initiatives, projects and events to brand the city as a gastronomic city. Table 1 indicates some of the facilities, events, initiatives, projects and conferences:

**Table 1.** Gastronomic Sources in İzmir

FACILITIES & PLACES	EVENTS	STAPLE INGREDIENTS
-Kemeraltı (Old historic bazaar of İzmir) -Urla Vineyard Route -Köstem Olive Oil Museum -Local bazaars (Tire, Sığacık, Bademler..) -Klazomenai Archaic Olive Oil Extraction Plant -Slow city of Sığacık	-International Urla Artichoke Festival -İzmir GastroFest -Alaçatı Herbs Festival -Seferihisar Mandarin Festival -Selçuk Ephesus Centaury Festival -Chocolate and Sweets Festival -Urla Vintage Festivities -Payamlı Fig Festival -Terra Madre 2023	-Olive and olive oil -Seafood -Fig -Artichoke -Grape -Cherry -Melon -Fresh Herbs -Mandarin
INITIATIVES / PROJECTS	CONFERENCES	FOOD & BEVERAGE
-Délice Network on Food&Gastronomy -Association of Aegean Gastronomic Tourism -İzmir Chaîne de Rotisseurs -İzmir Gourmet Guide -23 Geographically Indicated Products -Kemeraltı Selluka Project	-International Gastronomic Tourism Congress	-Şambali, Lokma, Kazandibi (desserts) -Tulum Cheese -Sıbye (beverage) -Boyoz, Gevrek, Kumru (pastries) -Kelle söğüş -Kokoreç -Olive oil dishes -Local wines -Stuffed mussel -Mezzes

Source: Compiled by the author

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Data from travel agencies and experts were collected from June to September 2021 using a multi-section and structured questionnaire, with a specific set of predefined questions, developed on Google Forms via the web to reach the maximum number of agents and experts in a limited time. Purposive sampling technique was chosen, based on volume of business for travel agencies in the downtown area. Purposive sampling includes those with the potential to provide more valid and useful information, and identification and selection of cases or participants aim to ensure that research resources are used as effectively as possible. A purposive strategy is applied when the researcher believes that, for the purpose of the study, those with differing views, and representing the important views, are included in the sample (Campbel et al., 2020). Snowball sampling, also called as 'chain referencing', was used to reach experts. It allows collecting data within the existing social environment, where each new acquaintance points to further acquaintances. As a rule, this technique is used to investigate topics that are difficult to explore with public research; so, where a probabilistic sample is

not necessary, snowball sampling makes it possible to reach an exponentially large number of users, in this case, tourism experts (Etikan et al., 2016).

The methodology part is composed of two mini surveys, and an example gastronomy tour program development based on these. The first survey was applied to 157 travel agency managers and owners in downtown İzmir area, where there are 251 travel agencies in total, according to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (2022). The second survey was conducted with industry experts. Given the aim of the study, a purposive sampling approach was used to determine the expert group, based on their professional relationship to the field in question, comprehensive knowledge, independent thinking, and differing views on the phenomenon. Thus, multiple informants responsible for the development, marketing, and operations components of gastronomy and tourism took part in the survey. These were 15 individuals; four involved with official tourism promotion for the region, two industry experts, two academic experts in the field and region, three chefs, one professional tourist guide, one travel agent owner, and two experts from local commercial agencies. The survey was organized around one main question, which concerned the facilities, activities, events, organizations and places that should be included in a gastronomy tour program for the region of İzmir. Finally, an example gastronomy tour program was created based on the results of these two surveys, and author's own contribution. As a summary, four steps were followed to create an exemplary gastronomy tour program, as follows: the identification of current situation, referral to expert opinions, making an inventory of potential sources, and the creation of a program including these sources.

The following part includes results and discussions related to:

- survey results related to gastronomy tourism offers of İzmir Travel Agencies
- expert opinions about gastronomic sources of İzmir region
- an example gastronomy tour program based on expert opinions

#### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

##### 4.1. Travel Agencies' Current Position in terms of Gastronomy Tourism Offers

The survey was intended to highlight the travel agencies' actual and / or potential gastronomy tourism offers for the development of gastronomic tourism in İzmir. They were asked about any plans for organizing a gastronomic tour in the near future; any preparations for a gastronomy tour to be put on sale in the near future; any gastronomic tours currently on sale; any information about the places to be evaluated for gastronomic tourism in and around İzmir, and also about any projects, training or cooperation executed with tourism authorities. Table 2 summarizes the results as follows:

**Table 2.** Current Gastronomic Offers of Travel Agencies in İzmir

	Yes	No	Total
any plans about organizing a gastronomic tour in the near future	47.1%	52.9%	157
any preparations for a gastronomy tour that will be on sale in the near future	20.4%	79.6%	157
any gastronomic themed tour currently on sale	9.6%	90.4%	157
any project/training/cooperation about gastronomic tourism with tourism authorities (Ministry, TÜRSAB, etc.)	13.4%	86.6%	157
knowledge about the places to be evaluated for gastronomic tourism in and around İzmir.	37.8%	62.2%	157

Source: Compiled by the author

It can be seen that almost half of the respondents (47.1%) reported plans for organizing a gastronomic tour in the near future; yet, only 20.4% had made preparations for a gastronomy tour for sale in the near future. 9.6% already had gastronomic themed tours currently on sale but 62.2% had no knowledge about the places suitable for gastronomic tourism in and around İzmir. Finally, only 13.4% of the respondents are aware that tourism authorities organise projects, trainings and cooperation efforts for gastronomic tourism.

##### 4.2. Expert Opinions About A Gastronomic Tour Program for İzmir

An important observation of the above-mentioned survey is that although travel agencies have plans for gastronomy tour development, they lack clear knowledge about the gastronomic resources. For this reason, experts were consulted. The experts were selected on the assumption of their extensive knowledge of the structure and functioning of gastronomy and tourism development, and that they would have an impact on relevant education or strategic planning and application regarding gastronomy tourism management. In accordance with the our main objective, the core group of respondents consisted of tourism officials, academics, industry leaders, tourism associations and chefs. They were asked their opinion about which culinary resources in and around İzmir should included in a hypothetical gastronomic tour package. An analysis of their answers using content analysis, led to the emergence of several code categories, such as activities, facilities, events, products and places, listed in Table 3

**Table 3.** Expert Opinions about a Gastronomic Tour Program Content

Title/Position	Experience	Facilities, activities, events, organizations
Tourism official	36 years	Facilities, places, products, activities, events and organizations that are designed to complement each other in different regions (villages/neighbourhoods). Most importantly, the setup of the gastronomy tour; its story should be emphasized.
Tourism official	18 years	Kemeraltı, Bergama Tulum Cheese Producers, Oleatrium olive and olive oil museum, Şirince, Kırazlı, Selçuk, Klazomenai olive oil plant, Urla Vineyard Route,
Tourism official	20 years	Tastings, workshops, walking tours, local produce shoppings, traditional diners, bazaars
Tourism official	30 years	Bazaars (Kemeraltı, Bademler, Sığacık, Tire); Vineyards (Urla, Selçuk, Kemalpaşa, Menderes); Olive and Olive oil related visits; product based visits (Boyoç, Sübye, cheese etc. production and tasting)
Academician	19 years	Kemeraltı walking and tasting tour, Köstem Olive Oil Museum, Sığacık Bazaar, Local Herb Shopping in Urla Bazaar, Dinner in Alaçatı, Çöpsis in Selçuk,
Academician	27 years	Local fresh herbs workshops; Aegean cuisine presentation from an expert; aegean cuisine culture and culinary traditions seminar, tastings integrated with other tourism related activities
Entrepreneur	15 years	Applied culinary workshops- Wine, olive oil etc. tasting events - Producer's Markets - Kemeraltı - Artisans and craftsmen of Basmane region
Entrepreneur	21 years	Dynamic tour packages that can be adapted to seasonal products, harvests; time-specific gastronomy related activities, conferences and festivals etc.
Chef / Owner	25 years	Tire (Tire bazaar, GastroTire, Osman Efendi Tatlı ve Dondurma Evi, Kayu Kebabçı Ali Usta, Babaoğlu); Ödemiş (Tongül Pide, Köfteci Hürsit); Selçuk (Çiy Restaurant, Yedi Bilgeler Winery), Menderes (İsa Bey Vineyards & Winhouse)
Chef	22 years	Kazandibi, Şambalı, Boyoç, Kumru, Manisa Kebab, Olive oil dishes, Lokma, Kemeraltı and Basmane Diners, Aegean fish and mezzes, Mistic gum cookies
Chef	40 years	Zeynel Ergin Gevrek House, Kordon Restaurants, Çeşme Kumru, kitchen workshops, vineyard tasting tours, Trademen Diners
Tourist Guide	17 years	Wine tastings, olive oil tastings, kitchen workshops, farmer's markets enriched with other cultural activities and sightseings
Travel Agent Owner	28 years	Food related festivals, events; vineyard visits; tastings of local food and beverages such as gevrek, sübye, lokma. Visits to bazaars and local producers in Tire, Sığacık, Bergama and Urla
Tourism Association Presedent	33 years	Urla Region: farmers' bazaar, vineyard route, Malgaca district, fine casual restaurants of Kuşçular; Seferhisar Region: dried tangerine, Armola cheese, Sığacık bazaar; Kemeraltı; tradesmen diners, traditional back streets İke Havra, Hisarönü and Kızlarbaşı Han; Tire and Çeşme-Alaçatı regions
Tourism Association President	15 years	Elgani Ezmecizade, Bizim Lokanta, Ayşa Boşnak Börekçisi, Palombo Ticaret Havyar, Hisarönü Şambalı, Turkish Coffee in Kızlarbaşı Han in Kemeraltı; staple products of the region such as olive oil dishes, fresh herb dishes and salads; boyoç, sübye etc.; workshops and tastings, visits to cheese, olive oil, wine producers

Source: Compiled by the author

Table 3 depicts all 15 experts' opinions about facilities, events, places, products and activities. The most frequently mentioned facilities are wine and olive oil production facilities. Place suggestions revolve around Kemeraltı, Urla, Bergama, Tire, Selçuk, Çeşme and Alaçatı regions. The most frequently mentioned products are fresh herbs, boyoz, kumru, sübye, gevrek, lokma, olive, cheese, fish; and, finally, the most common activities are bazaar visits, hands-on kitchen workshops, tastings, and local produce shopping tours on foot.

#### 4.3. An Example Tour Program for the region of İzmir

A sample gastronomic tour program was developed based on the opinions of the experts mentioned in the previous section. This part of the research is intended to offer suggestions and recommendations for the creation of a culinary-based package tour for the city of İzmir.

A successful culinary-based package tour would typically be adapted from current gastronomy tours and thus, can be easily adapted to include various culinary resources found in and around the city of İzmir. Local stakeholders should be involved in collaborative culinary opportunities so that travel agencies, the destination and the locals will all benefit, and the increased traffic will enable the destination to project a positive gastronomic image.

Another recommendation is to create gastronomic tours of various length, so that these can be offered either as self-contained tours, or as complementary to other types of tourism activity. It is also recommended that the tour begins and ends in İzmir to make it accessible from neighboring towns and flight connections. This would allow relevant city tours to be offered to extend the tour experience in the city itself.

The tour program should ensure a more holistic experience of all the elements regarded as culinary activity. Therefore, this sample tour depicted on Table 4 was designed to include various culinary experiences, such as local food tastings, farmers' markets, touring wineries and tasting wine, culinary museum visits, hands-on kitchen workshops, exploration of local culinary culture and customs, enjoying street foods, and visiting local high quality restaurants, as well as a few complementary cultural activities.

**Table 4.** Example gastronomy tour program for İzmir and its vicinity

Day 1	Tasting Kemeraltı	Walking tour: Tasting and exploring the old bazaar district "Kemeraltı" – breakfast at <i>Abacıoğlu Inn</i> , walking & shopping in the backstreets of Kemeraltı, lunch at <i>Manisa Doyuran Kebap, kazandibi</i> and <i>sambali</i> tasting in Hisarönü, Turkish coffee break at <i>Kızlarağası Inn</i> ; visit to <i>Agora Open Air Museum, Kordonboyu</i> walking tour in the evening and dinner at <i>Esnaf Lokantası</i> .
Day 2	Tasting Urla	<i>Köstem Olive Oil Museum</i> and <i>Klazomenai Olive Oil Plant</i> visits, lunch stop in <i>Malğaca Bazaar</i> and <i>Sanat Sokağı</i> tour in downtown Urla; Urla Vineyard Route and wine tastings
Day 3	Tasting Çeşme and Alaçatı	Walking tour in <i>Alaçatı</i> ; tasting mastic gum cookies and shopping; visit to <i>Çeşme Castle</i> , lunch stop at <i>Kumru Restaurant</i> , free time in the afternoon, sundowning celebration on <i>Ilıca Beach</i> , meze tasting along the seaside in the evening.
Day 4	Tasting Cıttaslow city of Sığacık, Şirince, Kirazlı	<i>Bademler Village Bazaar</i> , <i>Sığacık Castle Farmers' Bazaar</i> , visit to <i>Ancient City Of Teos</i> , wine tasting in <i>Şirince Village</i> in the evening, visit to a <i>Kirazlı Village</i> house restaurant for dinner
Day 5	Selçuk and Kuşadası	Visit to <i>House of Virgin Mary</i> and <i>Ancient city of Ephesus</i> , <i>Çöpiş Restaurant</i> for lunch time, <i>Oleatrium Olive And Olive Oil Museum</i> , free time in <i>Kuşadası</i> in the evening.
Day 6	Tasting Tire	Visit to <i>Tire Bazaar</i> , culinary workshop at <i>Kaplandağ Tire</i> , visit to <i>Historic Town of Birgi</i> which is on UNESCO World Heritage tentative list, evening stopover at <i>Ödemiş Tüngül Pide</i> , visit to Vineyards in Menderes region.
Day 7	İzmir	Breakfast at <i>Boyoz</i> shop and learn the art of making <i>Boyoz</i> with a workshop, sightseeing tour to <i>Asansör</i> and <i>Sübye</i> tasting while enjoying the view, Ferry tour to <i>Karşıyaka</i> ; <i>Gevrek</i> and <i>Tea</i> on board.

Source: Compiled by the author

Although the tour was designed as a weekly tour package, travel agencies can redesign the program to create multiple packages of various lengths. While it can be marketed as a complete gastronomy tour package in itself, shorter versions can be integrated with other touristic activities to create awareness of the region's gastronomic richness to promote future visitation. For instance, tours can be incorporated to product harvests, food festivals and other international mega events.

#### 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The key for the development of the tourism industry is the creation of a competitive tourism product that can best meet tourists' needs and expectations. Thus, tourism products should be differentiated and varied to attract more tourists to destinations. Newer tourism offers should emphasize a deeper understanding of local values (Su et al., 2020). Destinations should develop strategies to create value for tourists as individuals. Thus, specializing in emerging tourism markets can be an effective strategy for destination development, leading to the introduction of unique products and services to overcome consumers' indifference and support the promotion of the place. For this reason, such strategies should be considered and managed through suitable policies and planning, as well as by careful selection of the most attractive tourism features. Destination development involves place planning and design, and the design of routes and experiences. In this regard, industry and tourism official bodies should work together to create high-quality travel experiences, which should be incorporated into future content design efforts and policy formulations. All of these efforts will contribute to delivering value and encouraging repeat visits. The package tour market in particular seem to be intensifying their efforts in this direction. Travel professionals are placing increasing emphasis on experience attributes through tourist participation; gastronomy tourism is one of the types of tourism that is most appealing to pleasure-seeking, hedonistic-minded tourists.

Although travel services worldwide are becoming more specialized in niche travel products (Novelli, 2018), as tourists lose interest in look-alike tour packages, a survey of İzmir travel agencies and their offers has revealed that only a small percentage offer gastronomic tours, and that they lack awareness of local gastronomic resources. Therefore, the next phase of the research was to compile expert information about culinary resources of İzmir and its vicinity as a starting point for development of a prototypical gastronomy tour. Amini survey was conducted with experts, eliciting the nature of their expertise, their titles and proposals for gastronomic visits. A summary of their responses was the basis for the tour program. And finally, considering region's geography, and experts' recommendations, the route was created as a prototype tour program to inspire travel agencies' efforts in gastronomy tourism, and serve as a guide when creating their programs.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that gastronomy tours, as an additional theme, should be included in tourism product offers, alongside the traditional mass market-oriented packages. The current intensity of competition and post-pandemic uncertainty in the tourism economy make this differentiation even more urgent (Işık et al., 2020). New tour designs are required to meet the expectations of tourists pursuing unique and memorable experiences.

Therefore, tourism market should offer innovative tour packages that were previously unavailable by including services and products that allow tourists to co-create experiences. This research reveals the current structure of gastronomic tourism offered by travel agencies in Izmir. Future studies using different methodologies and data sets may adapt the research to other cities and countries for comparison and development, and shed light on the demand potential for food themed packaged tours.

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